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## An Apple for the Sergeant

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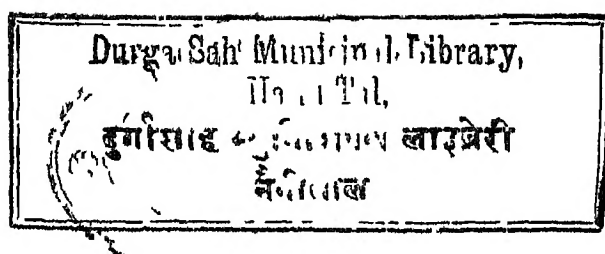
WHAT! NO MORNING TEA?

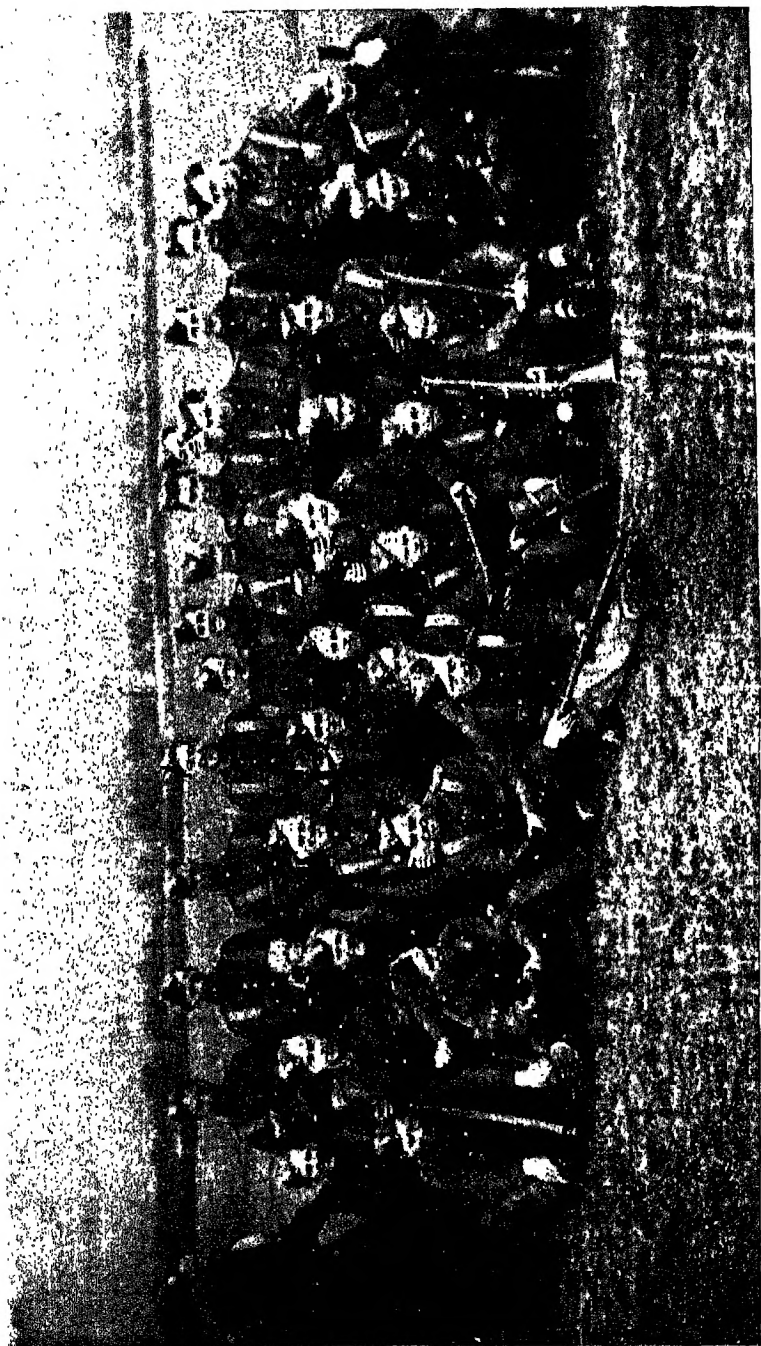
OH, IT'S NICE TO BE IN THE ARMY!

SHE WALKS IN RATTLEDRESS

ROOF OVER BRITAIN

(Official account of A.A. guns)





PLATOON PICTURE. "WE HAD BEEN IN THE ARMY EIGHT WEEKS"

# An Apple for the Sergeant

by

ANTHONY COTTERELL

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**THIS IS FROM  
NEW BOOK OF DONKEY**

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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## WE MARCHED DOWN THE HILL

MARCHING ALONG I FELT RATHER PLEASED WITH MYSELF. THE FIRST eight weeks of Army life had been successfully survived; we had passed all the accepted tests of elementary aptitude and in general were beginning to feel quite professional. We seemed to have been in the Army a long time. Writing now, four years later, it is difficult to see how we got that impression; but when everything is new, when you are constantly learning new things and making progress, every week takes on the dignity of months.

We marched along the lane down the hill on which most of the town of Dorchester is planted and right-wheeled opposite the Chequers. A few hundred yards down the side street we came to a corner house across the road from the town's modest, second-string cinema. This corner house was the H.Q. of 'S' Company, the specialist Company which we were now joining to be trained as signallers, carrier drivers or M.T. drivers. Each of us felt some sense of personal triumph in coming to this Company, because we had been selected from a large number of candidates.

I think I had been one of the first in our platoon to realize that to become a specialist would probably involve much less marching and tedious physical exertion than to continue training as an ordinary rifleman. I had checked this by cross-questioning members of 'S' Company I met about the place, and decided to get there if I could. I tried to dissuade others from providing any formidable competition for my own candidature by painting lively stories of the discomfort, the long hours, the poor quarters and repressive discipline involved. But in vain—the prospect of having something technical to tinkle with (which was the only deterrent as far as I was concerned) was the main attraction for most people.

When we got to 'S' Company H.Q. we waited outside for some time and were then split into three batches. As far as I remember about ten of us went to the Signals, and other, larger batches were divided between the Carrier Platoon and the M.T. Platoon. The sergeant-major of 'S' Company was superintending these proceedings. At first sight he was no sweetheart; there was a reptilian calm about him—an air of self-contained efficiency bordering on the sinister. He walked in and out of the Company Office smoking a pipe and wearing his side cap squashed on his head in a way which we had been contemptuously taught to discard soon after our arrival. But these irregularities counted for nothing in the general picture of ding-dong efficiency which he produced. We were called to attention and stood at ease to hear a few words of welcome from our new Company Commander, a tall, dark and handsome individual. He assured us that a high standard of cleanliness, enthusiasm and technical competence was not only demanded in his Company but by one means or another consistently obtained. After he had disappeared again into his office we went on waiting.

"I don't fancy this very much," said Daly, who was standing next to me. The sergeant-major's head appeared out of the window.

"Second man from the end, rear rank. Take his name. Talking on parade," he barked, and disappeared, evidently psychic. His victim, Daly, had been my closest associate up to this time: a plump, portentous, pink-faced youth with a moustache, who smoked a pipe, talked like your grandfather, and managed an extraordinary equanimity in face of the criticisms evoked by his pompous approach to our extremely unpompous life.

Being a soldier consists mostly of being inconvenienced; of waiting in a line to be fed, to be paid, to buy a stamp, and so on. A surprising proportion of your time is taken up in petty processes of personal administration and supply. You are inspected, expected and suspected every minute of the day. You are urged to use your initiative and simultaneously prevented from doing so.

Presently three sergeants appeared. One of them summoned us—"Right, all men for Signal Platoon fall in over here—sharp. Now come on, move to it. Nawh—not there—here. Come on, hurry up—haven't got all day. Fall in in three ranks. Squad properly at ease. Squad 'TCHUN—move to the right—right TURN—by the left, quick march—left-right, left-right."

Our particular sergeant was a dark, saturnine little man with a jaundiced approach to life, especially Army life. He would tell us that much to his regret he had been a regular soldier—and now he had been called back as a reservist. He marched us down the road, round the corner and back on to the main London road again. We crossed the road and halted in a yard round the back of a modern pub.

"Right, now stand easy," said the sergeant. "I 'ave just got one thing to say to you. If you don't muck about with me I won't muck about with you. But if you do muck about with me then I will muck about with you, accordingly. Now you're going to be here for some months, at the end of which time you will pass out—or it's to be hoped you will pass out—as trained regimental signallers. My privilege is to teach you. Any questions?"

"Sergeant," said a small man I did not know, coming to attention.

"What is it, lad?"

"Is this the Signals Platoon, Sergeant?"

"Why, now you come to mention it, I think it is," said the sergeant, "but if you like it better we could call it something else."

"I think I come to the wrong place, Sergeant."

"I thought things were going too well," said the sergeant.

Another sergeant appeared, who might have been the sergeant-major's favourite son. Physically very like him, but not yet quite so strongly flavoured.

"You ought to have called the roll," he said.

"I ought to have done a lot of things," said our sergeant, and started calling out our names.

"Baker, Potton, Scuse, Smith, Cotterell, Wallace . . ."

Presently the missing man was identified, and the wrong man was sent off to fetch him.

"You can't be all together. You'll have to sleep where we can fix you

in, but that won't be a bad thing, because you will be with men more advanced than yourselves and they'll be able to help you. Now, any two of you special friends?"

I thought this presented possibilities of comfort, so I seized the man next to me, whom I had never spoken to before, and said firmly, "Yes, we are."

He was a very tall, rather serious-looking young man whose name I subsequently discovered to be Baker.

"Right, you two wait here—the rest come along with me," said the Sergeant.

"I hope you're right," said Baker to me, and I didn't feel any too sure.

We looked around the yard in which we were waiting. There were some wooden stairs up to a loft, where the sergeant had just led three or four of the rest of them. He now reappeared and, calling us to follow behind, took the others through an outer barnlike apartment, which had been fitted up as a class-room, into a dormitory. It was quadrilaterally shaped, with a low ceiling supported by thin metal pillars. Most of the space was taken up with a closely packed row of beds along each wall. A high standard of cleanliness and order was prevailing. In the middle of the room was a table with two benches. There were about half a dozen men sitting at the table with a sergeant at one end, tapping out Morse on a W.T. set. Three or four other men were sitting on the beds, all of them intently engaged on taking dictation from the Morse. It was immediately obvious to me that I should never be able to learn the Morse code. The sergeant looked annoyed at the interference, and so did some of the class.

Five of us were allotted beds here, and then the sergeant led Baker and myself along a narrow passage leading out of the other side of the room, and finally into a small room with just enough space for two plank beds and a packing-case, off which a mouse jumped and scurried away as we entered the room.

"We keep the bread in here," said the sergeant, "so you're liable for a lot of rats and mice, but if you like privacy it's a very nice little bunk. Right—I'll leave you in here; I want you fallen in outside in the yard—ten minutes' time. Get it?"

He disappeared, and we started looking round, which was quickly done. The floor and the walls and ceiling were all of flimsy, ramshackle wood in unconventionally angled planes, but the window gave out on to a pleasantly picturesque little garden, and by craning out of it you could catch sight of what must have been the River Frome, or, anyway, a branch of it. Gingerly—I am not very fond of either rats or mice—I looked into the packing-case. There were two large tins of jam and half a loaf.

"Better than no bread," I said.

The beds consisted each of three narrow planks, supported on miniature trestles at the head and foot. They did not look very snug after the pull-out beds we had had up at the barracks.

As soon as we fell in outside we were marched off to a stable over in another part of the town, calling at the Company stores to collect a palliasse for each man. The stable was full of straw, which we stuffed into our palliasses. We marched back to the Company stores, where we queued up for about an hour to be issued with three blankets, all of which we

carried back to the billet. We were then required to return to the Company office to collect our kit-bags, which had been brought over on a truck, a convenience which did not, for some reason or other, extend to delivery at our platoon billet or stable.

It was now time for dinner—served and eaten in the barrack room. Baker and I took ours and ate it in our bunk, which provided a pleasant illusion of private-retreat. There was no hot water afterwards, so it was difficult to wash up.

In the afternoon our signal training started. We sat crammed on two backless benches on either side of a trestle table while Sergeant Ensor addressed us, supported by two lance-corporals whose duties seemed, shall we say, light. One of them was a young man, who disappeared after a day or two—I forget where; the other was an old soldier who didn't say much.

The first job was to learn the Morse code. We were horrified to hear that we were expected to have learned this by the following day. That is to say, to have learned what the various letters and numbers were represented by in terms of dots and dashes. I have never been able to remember anything by heart, and I was afraid this would be the case with Morse. In fact, we were all afraid. I think being in the ranks gives one a pleasantly modest conception of one's capabilities. We learned to call the letters of the alphabet ACK, BEER, CHARLIE, DON, EDWARD, FREDDIE, GEORGE, HARRY, INK, JOHNNIE, KING, LONDON, MONKEY, NUTS, ORANGE, PIP, QUEEN, ROBERT, SUGAR, TOC, UNCLE, VIC, WILLIAM, X-RAY, YORKER, ZEBRA. But they have now all been changed. The alphabet now runs—ABLE, BAKER, CHARLES, DOG, EASY, FOX, GEORGE, HOW, ITEM, JIG, KING, LOVE, MIKE, NAN, OBOE, PETER, QUEEN, ROGER, SUGAR, TARE, UNCLE, VICTOR, WILLIAM, X-RAY, YOKE, ZEBRA.

It wasn't an ideal classroom, having a sloping stone floor and a carriage driveway entrance unprotected against the lively prevailing winds, so that anything which could blow away did blow away. We were watched all the time by a horse, which was quartered a few feet away. The sergeant issued us with note-books and then drew the Morse dots and dashes on the board for us to copy down in our note-books. While he was doing this the platoon officer appeared. We hadn't seen him before. He was extremely young and was carrying a fishing-rod. He stood behind the class for a minute or two rather uncertainly before he asked us our names one by one. Then he went away.

After we had all copied down the symbols on the board—some of us were slower than others—the sergeant told the corporals to set up the lamp. They set up a miniature searchlight on a tripod, and the sergeant started to describe it. "This is the lamp signalling daylight short range," he said, and continued, without batting an eyelid or showing any evidence that he knew what he was talking about: "The lamp can be read under average conditions in daylight at a distance of two miles with the naked eye and three-four miles with the telescope. At night six miles with the naked eye and nearly twice that distance with the telescope. The beam of light from the lamp is visible for forty yards on either side of a station one mile distant, and proportionately farther at longer ranges." The corporals then showed us the thing in detail and we had to take notice

of the way it worked and how to test it. Half-way through, the other younger sergeant came in with an order that we were to interrupt the class for the purpose of emptying our palliasses. "But we've only just filled 'em," said someone. "You don't interest me," said the sergeant. We collected the palliasses from our beds, fell in outside, and marched across the town to the stables, where we emptied the straw into the same barn from which we had collected it. There may even have been some good reason for this, but we were given no information.

I was sent with two others to fetch the tea, which meant carrying two large buckets of it about a quarter of a mile. They were extremely heavy, and I got my best battle-dress trousers soaked on the journey. We had tea in our bunk again. There was a most luxurious sense of ownership about having this half-share in a ground-floor attic. After tea Baker and I went across the road to a secondhand furniture and general dealer. Here we managed to find a white cupboard about three feet square and two feet deep, standing on four legs, which we bought for five shillings. We scrubbed it out and placed it, still soaking, between our beds. As the beds were only just off the floor and the cupboard legs were about four feet high, it didn't seem right somehow, so we guillotined the legs and used them as a support for the packing case with the food in it. We hoped that this might make things more difficult for the mice and rats, but as it turned out they found it no inconvenience.

The Chequers, which was a pleasant little house, was only about fifty yards up the street, and I met Daly there in the evening. He and the rest of the Carrier Platoon were billeted in a Church Hall. They didn't seem to have done so well as we had.

I left Daly after a bit and went back to the billet, where Baker was already sitting trying to memorize the Morse alphabet. Funnily enough, he wasn't doing too well, though he was just the sort of man whom you might expect to learn it immediately. And he was very young, 23 or 24, which, we had been told, was a help in picking it up quickly.

Presently we went round to the canteen for some food and then came back to bed. It was hardly ten o'clock, but we had had a tiring day.

The process of moving living-quarters from a barrack hut at one end of a little country town to a stable at the other may not seem a very spectacular or exciting change, but we had found it so.

The absence of straw in our palliasses became sharply evident when we went to bed, especially in my case, because one of the three planks was more resilient than the others. It hung in a rounded curve which enabled the development of a sharp pinching action if I moved at all suddenly.

## THE SERGEANT WAS A SINGER

WE WERE WOKEN EARLY NEXT MORNING BY THE GOLDEN VOICE OF YOUNG Sergeant Cheelah, whose bunk was immediately next door to ours. We peered at him through one of the many holes in the thin wooden wall. The sergeant was singing, as he was subsequently to sing every day, a

song which he soon taught us word for word. I can now only remember the line, "No souvenirs, no little tokens for my memory chest, but maybe it's best—no souvenirs." He shared the bunk with another sergeant, a good deal older, who, after daily, hopeless protest, used to cover himself up in the blankets; not that that could possibly have had any excluding effect.

We went along the passage to wash. Up in the barracks we had had a properly appointed wash-house; here there were simply a limited number of tin bowls. It was discouraging washing in a crowded stable in cold water on a cold morning, after having waited fifteen minutes for a tin bowl. Also, we were the new boys. Everyone else knew their way around and exchanged enviable familiarities. The sense of professional experience which we had felt marching away from the barracks yesterday was now at low ebb. And I had not realized that I was mess orderly. I had to run the quarter-mile to the cookhouse and try to run the quarter-mile back carrying two buckets of tea, haunted by the communal impatience which had been expressed at my late start. But I must say the breakfast wasn't bad at all. A considerable improvement on the food we had had up at the barracks. It is extraordinary how the quality of Army food varies from place to place—from plain terrible to not bad at all.

One mistake I had made was not to realize how quickly it was hoped that we should appear on parade for P.T. We were fallen in outside in the yard and double-marched very briskly about a quarter of a mile on to a piece of common land about the size of a large football field, surrounded by houses. Here the rest of the Company were already paraded; it seemed to be a matter of bitter concern to Sergeant Cheetah that we had been the last platoon to arrive. The sergeant-major was in charge of the proceedings, which he started with a few snarling remarks to the effect that any sign of half-heartedness in the exertions would be dealt with in no half-hearted manner. As I said before, he was extremely impressive, this sergeant-major.

Impressiveness usually wears a bit thin when you get to know the impressive individual better, but not so with Sergeant-Major Legge. He really did run 'S' Company efficiently. He seemed to have all the ingredients for successfully performing a much more important job.

But there was no time for these speculations during the 'S' Company P.T. parade. We were hunted and chased about the place for half an hour or so every morning, ending in a run round the outskirts of Dorchester, which I personally preferred to the games which preceded it. I don't like competitive games, especially the ones where you are liable to personal injury. As I was one of the last ten to return from the run round the houses I had to run a substantial part of the way again, so my bed wasn't made up. I had folded and arranged the blankets but, in the unexpected hurry of being mess orderly and then having this extra run to do, I hadn't had time to complete the rest of the detailed arrangements required. I was therefore arraigned before the sergeant, who said that evidently I was a slow, clumsy type of man and that I really must learn to be quicker and smarter. My boots weren't clean, he said, and my cap badge didn't look as if it had been touched. I said I had done my best, and he pointed out that, if only I'd smarten myself up a bit, the

Signals Platoon offered many opportunities for technical training which might help me to a more remunerative job in after-life. The Post Office were always looking for ex-Army signallers, and once in the Civil Service who knows what might not happen. In the end he became quite fatherly.

We spent the morning learning Morse, with a twenty-minute break, during which I repaired to a dairy where, at that earlier stage in the hostilities, you could still get things made with Dorset cream, also chocolate. I had again become a keen addict to the pleasures of the tuck-box. After the break we were marched with our empty palliasses round to the stable again. We filled them with the same straw with which we had filled, and subsequently emptied, them yesterday. It didn't seem to be any better or worse for its night in the stable.

I had a letter at lunch-time, forwarded from the *Daily Express*, from a man who said:

*Dear Sir,*

*After thirteen years of married life my wife recently walked out of our comfortable little home, leaving me, the breadwinner, with two little sons aged 3½ and 5 years, and a baby daughter 2 years old.*

*That was a fortnight ago and we have seen nothing of her since.*

*The cause was sacrilege of our marriage vows on her part, affairs with men, which I could tolerate no longer, and told her so.*

*She promptly packed her things and deserted the home and us.*

*She took with her the housekeeping money, our holiday reserve cash, and even broke open the children's money-box and confiscated its contents.*

*I have discovered, since she departed, that she has also taken our children's endowment assurance policies, which I now realize are in her name, and our Co-operative Society Pass Book containing a sum of cash invested from dividends on our purchases, which was in her name also.*

*Considering that throughout the whole of our married life my wife has been solely and adequately provided for by my earnings alone, is it possible that in civilized England a woman, married and with her responsibility of three little children, should be allowed to get away with this?*

*A father who acted thus would be severely punished by the law.*

*But according to the Secretary of the London Co-operative Society she can get away with it, as far as the investments of dividends on purchases made from my earnings are concerned.*

*Other husbands please note.*

*Yours etc.*

*(Sgd.) . . . . .*

*P.S. Any other details re above will be willingly supplied in confidence. The writer is advertising manager of a large city concern and the above facts can be verified by the Police, who were present when my wife actually departed (July 19th, 12 p.m.) and who personally witnessed her taking the cash, etc. They extended their genuine sympathy to me later and added their opinion that a wife and mother who would do this was better gone.*

I sat down on my plank bed and wrote him an encouraging letter. I took quite a bit of trouble with it.

It was a warm evening, so Baker and I walked out into the fields to

continue learning the Morse code. Then I came back to work on the book I was writing. It was a diary of my first months in the Army, which I wrote almost hour by hour. There was no opportunity to sit and think back on what had happened. The only way was to do it as it happened.

The diary covered the first two months. I was now spending my time in writing in some incidents and crossing out others. I sometimes wondered whether I wasn't a fool to waste what little spare time I had in writing something which, apart from its literary demerits, looked like being profoundly outdated by the fall of France, which was now taking ominous shape. Not that we were particularly aware of this.

We were more interested in our progress in the Morse code. It was quite extraordinary how interested we became. To my surprise and complacency I picked it up very quickly. It is the only military activity for which I have shown more than mediocre aptitude. You become a sort of mental athlete with off-days and on-days so far as your speed and accuracy in sending and receiving Morse is concerned. Your whole life is permeated with de-de-de-da-de. After a day devoted to arms drill or weapon training you have no particular conviction of progress and not often any means of assessing it. But here we spent the day with the sergeant reading us blocks of letters or news stories from the *Daily Mirror* in Morse dots and dashes. We had to write them down, then hand them in to be marked. You could see how you were getting on.

Most of the time we spent in the stable doing this or listening to lectures. Every day we would march out in a little crocodile, armed with our pencils and note-books, and stand in pairs reading a lamp which one of the corporals was operating several fields away. You took it in turns, one man reading the lamp, the other writing down the letters as he read them out. The great attraction was that it occupied your mind and made the time pass very quickly. You had to learn to send Morse ten words a minute W.T. and eight words a minute with the lamp. Your whole life was devoted to obtaining this proficiency. It is a tangible skill, with a pleasant sense of expertness attaching to it, and most people get interested in it.

I think the reason why sailors seem to be on the whole more content with their work than soldiers is simply that their jobs have more of this satisfying sense of expertness about them. Some time ago I ventured a little from the shore in a destroyer. The living conditions were violently overcrowded. Those who didn't sleep in hammocks slept on lockers or on the floor; on the pitching, heaving, devilishly vibrating floor.

Guarding convoys up and down the North Sea is sometimes very exciting, often very monotonous, but at least it is a vital job. In the mere business of sailing, let alone fighting, every man is well occupied. When at dusk they go to Action Stations there is a very good chance that there will be some action. To my horror, we were attacked on the trip I made. The Germans came out of the clouds, dropped bombs and machine-gunned us, and instantly the whole ship was a fountain of red tracer and barking, screaming guns. You could see the tracer disappearing into the Heinkel. "We've got her, by God, I think we've got her!" shouted Captain Pizey. We hadn't, but it was very satisfying. More exciting than manning a Bofors gun on land, guarding an area which the Germans have never attacked and don't apparently intend to. You may have been there two

years without anything happening, but all the time you must behave as if it is going to happen any minute. It is much easier to be interested in cleaning a gun if you think you are going to use it than if such an event is improbable. That is, and always has been, the main problem in keeping an army eager—the fact that you have to train and live most of the time in an atmosphere of make-believe and rehearsal.

Every day before lunch we had twenty minutes' arms drill. Although we only had this twenty minutes, we drilled much more smartly than most of the Rifle Company Platoons who were doing far more arms drill and weapon training. The reason was that we were let off as soon as we had reached a certain standard and therefore had something to gain by doing the thing well.

One corporal in the Company had the carriage, something of the features, and the complexion, of an ox. Everything about him was chunky and terrific. He wore an expression of great ferocity when he remembered, as a form of insurance against exploitation of his good nature. There were few limits to his simplicity. He was in charge of a church hall where about forty men were billeted, and one Saturday morning this was inspected by the Company Commander, who was disappointed with the general standard of cleanliness, and ordered that the place should be scrubbed out for a further inspection next day. This, of course, meant spending Saturday afternoon on the job. The corporal announced this to the platoon as they sat round, mostly on the floor, eating their dinner. He said he was sorry but it couldn't be helped, and then when they went on shouting he tried hard to lose his temper. But as he hated hurting anyone's feelings no one ever paid much attention.

After dinner young Daly went up to him and said, "Corporal, may I ask a personal favour? I don't like to have to do it, but my mother's coming down for the week-end to see me, and we shan't have much time together, so I wondered if you could possibly let me off scrubbing."

The corporal said that would be quite all right, and Daly and I went off to the movies. A minute later another man came up and asked if he might be excused as he had arranged to meet his young lady to buy their engagement ring. The corporal let him off and he was followed in almost non-stop succession by men whose fathers were ill, whose brothers had come down for the day before sailing overseas, whose wives were expecting a baby in about half an hour's time, and so on. He let them all off and scrubbed out the entire hall himself.

Baker and I were fascinated to discover about this time that Private Daly was having a romance. As I said before, Daly was an extremely respectable young man, and he had fittingly chosen to pay his attentions to an extremely respectable young woman. They used to walk in the Public Gardens. We never let him hear the last of it. It probably doesn't sound very clever or entertaining, or even kind, but that was the brutalizing effect of military life.

Romantic activities were slightly more general in this platoon than during our first eight weeks. People were now at home enough to have time to think of something else besides forthcoming ordeals and the girl they left behind them. I may be sentimental, but it always seems to me very sad how quickly and successfully people forget, temporarily anyway, the girl they left behind them. And *vice versa*.

The Signals Platoon were a very presentable crowd on the whole, clerks and skilled workers mostly, average age about twenty-five. There was one particular individual whom most of us found difficult to enthuse about. He was completely the promising young man. His job as a salesman in private life had infected him with being obliging (to the sergeant), well turned out, on his toes, first off the mark, up in the morning early, neat and clean, and all the other aggravating virtues. Perhaps I am being malicious and he was really a very praiseworthy character. Like all the rest of us he had been jerked out of his job, in which, no doubt, he was doing better than most people, and, being jerked out, was doing his best to make a success of Army life. Heaven knows I spent my time before coming into the Army largely in writing articles in which his kind of young man was held up as extremely desirable. But he brought to his prosecution of a successful Army career all the unpleasant characteristics which are developed in the pursuit of small-scale commercial success. His attention to detail, his anxiety to please, and to show off his own grasp of the situation, his superb indifference to other people—which I wouldn't have minded if he hadn't pretended to be extremely concerned about everyone—were too much.

I preferred the young man who told me the story of his life one day while we were waiting in a queue to be issued with something at the Company stores. He was the elder of two brothers whose father had died and left them a small garage business, on the agreement that the elder brother had a sixty per cent share, the younger brother forty per cent. After three years the elder brother had no per cent at all and was working for a weekly wage paid him by his younger brother. "I don't know what there was about him—he was always up to something, there was no holding him down to anything," he said. "I suppose he was sharp and I wasn't. Too sharp by half, my old woman always said."

I felt sorry for this man, who had no capacity for looking after himself at all; he was beginning to be exploited in the Army just as he had been exploited in civil life. If you wanted someone to do your fire picquet for you you only had to tell him and the thing was done. There are some very simple people about.

It took about a fortnight to finish off the manuscript of my book and I then took it to a typewriting school to have it typed. I sat there among the students going through it. Sometimes I would work in an unused lounge of the Antelope Hotel, but here I was inclined to be interrupted by the porter, who liked to tell me all he knew.

Baker and I really appreciated our bunk. You can't overestimate the value of occasional seclusion. It was pleasant to lie there reading by candlelight. We could do this after 'lights out' in the outer room, providing we kept an eye on the illumination of the sergeants' bunk, and blew out our candle when we heard preparations to blow out theirs, so that there were no tell-tale gleams through the holes in the wall. Then we would lie in bed discussing the affairs of the day and—which is much more engrossing in the Army—the affairs of yesterday. The fairy-story of what you did before coming into the Army and how delightful it will be to lead exactly the same life afterwards.

Baker had been some kind of chemical research worker. He had lived in a small West-country town. In a modest way he was ambitious, but



PRIVATE BAKER, PRIVATE DALY, PRIVATE COTTERELL



"I DIDN'T ENJOY ROUGH RIDING"

his horizons were naturally confined to what he had known. He was a very intelligent young man, capable of doing all sorts of thing, with a considerable appetite for seeing the world. No doubt he will see quite a bit of it in the Army before he is finished, otherwise he might easily have lived and died in his small West-country town. Of course, that is probably pleasant and much more satisfactory than the majority of lives, but it seems a pity not to have a look around. He had the usual exaggerated ideas of the difficulties involved in jumping outside the rut into which you have been put by the recommendation of the headmaster of your local Grammar School. I told him how when I was on the *Express* I wrote an article on the subject of how frightened young men were to jump out of their ruts. A few days after the publication of this manifesto I was sitting at my desk in the office when a young man was shown up.

"Are you the one that wrote the article telling people to come to London like Dick Whittington?" he said.

"Well, yes," I said.

"Well, I've come," he said, and stood waiting for guidance which I was in no very strong position to give.

On questioning him I found that he had £2 or £3 in the world and was supporting his mother. He had given up his job on reading my advice and come to London to seek his fortune. He said the job he had in South Wales was so penurious that he could not possibly keep his mother on it. He had tried to and failed.

I naturally had to assume responsibility for him. It seemed pointless to send him to apply for a job in the ordinary way. He had no particular qualifications. He was only twenty. It seemed to me the main qualification for him to exploit was his Dick Whittington story, which seemed to argue a degree of resource and character above the average. We decided that the best thing was for him to apply for employment on as high a level as possible. He wanted to go into the film business, and had written a script which was, of course, no particular use. I told him there was no sense in trying to get employment as a script-writer. It would be much better to pretend he had a passionate vocation to be a cinema usher. I told him the best thing to do was to impact himself on people who were noted for their appreciation of the self-made man. It seemed advisable to concentrate on the entertainment business, because there was much hiring and firing done. For some reason I suggested that he should go and see Mr. Butlin of the Holiday Camps, Emlyn Williams because he was a Welshman, and Alexander Korda. I sent him off and arranged to meet him at the end of the day. The extraordinary thing was that when I did meet him he had interviewed the lot. He didn't exactly get a job, but I thought it was a considerable achievement to have spoken to three individuals so fenced around with outer offices and stage-doorkeepers.

In the end I got him a job selling automatic dart scorers. It was a hellish job and I felt guilty about the whole thing. He took a room in the East End under the supervision of Giles Romilly, who worked on the *Daily Express*, and presently got him a job in some Left Wing organization. So that was one excursion into business efficiency methods which did not come to much.

I had to be very tired in the evening not to be nerve-racked by the

mice and the occasional rat which played and gambolled and loved and fed in and around our room. They rushed up and down while I lay there in a state of considerable nervous agitation, plaintively hanging on the floor with my boot, which dispersed but never finally discouraged them. I tried not to take any notice of it, for presumably in France, where we all expected to be consigned in the near future, I would live with rats and mice for years. But, however much I determined to take no notice of them, the conviction would presently return that there was one in my bed, such as it was. While every reasonable argument conclusively showed that I had no fundamental physical injury to fear from a field-mouse, I could never resist checking up whether there was one there or not.

But with all this inconvenience, life in this billet was better than it had been in the last one. Some people had it pleasantly soft indeed. There was a P.T. instructor who had nothing to do except take our half-hour morning parade; the rest of the time he mostly spent asleep in bed with the window shut and the blankets drawn firmly over his head. The Signal storeman was another character whose contributions were intermittent. He had a little room full of signalling equipment which it was his sole function to protect from robbery and maintain in working order. He was a regular soldier, otherwise his inactivity would have driven him mad long since. I envied this man. It was a job which would have suited me down to the ground. I even went so far as to ask him whether he was happy and satisfied. I asked him if, having adopted the Army as a profession, he did not secretly wish for a slightly more spectacular role. He assured me that he had never been happier in his life.

## 3

## AND WE MARCHED BACK AGAIN

THINGS WERE GOING TOO SMOOTHLY TO LAST FOR LONG. WE WERE ALL very comfortable, so we were moved. Though a frequent change of scene is a great help during the monotony of training, it is always disconcerting when it happens. You can't help feeling that it is bound to be a change for the worse. There were plenty of grounds for believing that this was to be a change for the worse. The B.E.F. were falling back fast, so presumably things were going to change progressively for the worse from now on. There were the usual rumours which accompany any impending move. Cartloads of tropical kit had been seen being unloaded into the Company stores, not to mention Polar equipment and luggage labels printed 'Troop Convoy to France'. What it finally boiled down to was that we were being shifted to a half-built hutted camp on the hill behind the barracks.

Baker and I had considerable discussion as to whether we should be allowed to keep our privately bought furniture in a barrack room. We didn't know whether to ask permission or not. He was for asking permission—I was for the *fait accompli*. It always seems to me that the very fact of asking permission raises in the mind of the person you are asking a light of doubt, and the horrible prospect of a responsibility to

be taken. It seems absurd to be exercised about whether or not we could have a small wooden cupboard. But it had made a considerable difference to our standard of living and was therefore valuable. It was a symbol of self-determination. Finally, we waited until the truck was half loaded, then stuck it in the middle and camouflaged it with military equipment.

Our new quarters were a little too spartan for my liking. There were about thirty-six in the Signals Platoon and thirty of us were quartered in one of the standard-type barrack huts. The room was furnished quite simply with a fire extinguisher. Before we left our ex-billet we had had to scrub down our plank beds, and pile them neatly in a corner. We had assumed from this that there would be other plank beds waiting for us in our new quarters—but not so. This made us all radiantly happy, especially when Sergeant came in and ordered us to parade at the Company stores for the purpose of relinquishing one of our three blankets.

The rest of the Company were quartered in similar huts, about half a dozen of them, planted on a hillside by a railway line overlooking the barracks and the prison, but with a large expanse of rolling grassland behind, so that it was by no means unpleasantly situated. It might be worse, we thought, as we filed in to dinner. After all, there was a proper dining hut with tables and benches, and though it had been pleasantly informal to eat in the room where we slept and worked, these more elaborate arrangements were probably more satisfactory. But it started raining as we queued up for dinner. It was only then that I, for one, realized that the dining hut had no roof, nor any glass in the windows, nor any door in the doorway. It was more of a gesture than anything.

About the same time we discovered that it was very difficult to keep our clothes and boots clean, owing to the rich nutty chalk subsoil which clogged on to everything and made the whole process of personal maintenance much more of a chore than it had been back in the stable down in town. However, our cupboard had survived with no more than a few sarcastic comments from the sergeants. The sergeants slept up one end of the room. Those who wished to ingratiate themselves with the authorities slept as near the sergeants as possible. Of course, Baker and I were passionately anxious to ingratiate ourselves with the authorities, but our approach was more subtle. We played hard to get and slept right down the other end of the room.

Sleeping on the floor is another technique again. We had two blankets and a ground sheet. With these we had to establish some sort of arrangement with the wooden floor. For a pillow we could use a partly emptied sector of our kit bags. Briefly, the difficulties were that if we lay flat or prone we ricked our backs, and if we lay on our sides the floor lacked the voluptuous resilience which makes this position practical in an ordinary bed. I won't say that I didn't sleep the first few nights, but I felt as if I had been for a long cross-country run when I got up. I felt that it must have done me good, otherwise I wouldn't feel so terrible. By and by, helped by watching the approach and technique of one of the stray dogs round the camp, I managed to make myself fairly comfortable. After a day or two I was just as reluctant to get up off the floor in the morning as I am to get out of my bed at home.

The week-end after we moved my father and mother came down. They stayed at the Antelope and we spent the week-end going for walks

round the town and sitting too long over hotel afternoon teas. I introduced them to my ex-sergeant Parker and my present sergeant and to the little East End boy, Benny Cohen, who had been the life and soul of our first eight weeks' training. We went out to tea with Baker and Daly. I think my parents imagined that I must be leading a paranoiac and hypersensitive existence with bullies constantly twisting my arm, and vicious clods jeering at me, encouraged by brutal and dehumanized sergeants. I think they were pathetically relieved at the relatively civilized facts of our everyday social and business life.

Sitting at tea in Judge Jeffrey's Old World Restaurant was almost rejuvenatingly like the times they used to come down to see me at school. Baker and Daly were exactly like two guest schoolboys. The esoteric nature of our conversation, the preoccupation with administrative details, the concern to propitiate petty functionaries, the fear of getting back late, and the schoolboy appetites in the teashop were all exactly the same. We were taken upstairs for my parents to meet the charming couple who ran the restaurant. I was grateful to them and their managers, Miss Gillespie, for running it so well; its existence had made a great difference to my everyday comfort. The walls of the restaurant were, at one point, hung about with such things as *circa* eighteenth-century muskets.

"Rather the same type as they issued to us," said Daly.

"It'll be bows and arrows next," said Baker.

"Bows perhaps; arrows I doubt," said Daly.

We had to be up early next morning to march down to the town and scrub out our old billets. When I see that there is no further chance of evading some activity of this kind I usually try to throw myself into it whole-heartedly on the theory that, if I can possibly interest myself in it, time will pass quicker. This constructive and enthusiastic mood usually lasts for several minutes. It isn't long before someone more manually agile gets impatient with one's clumsiness and does the job himself.

"Do it properly or not at all, Cotterell. Here, give it to me."

I always give them anything they want and retire modestly to the background and watch. As a matter of fact there isn't usually any need to do much on these mass fatigues if you don't want to, because there is never enough equipment to go round. We usually get about seven mops and three buckets for use by seventeen men—a state of affairs which obviously leaves many loopholes for the less determinedly energetic. The surprising thing is that most men fret at inactivity. So there are usually enough people fretting to keep the mops and buckets occupied.

After lunch we drove over to Weymouth with Baker and Daly. We had tea and took pictures. I wanted my parents to carry back a fairly happy impression of my state of mind, so I tried to look contented, but only succeeded in registering jibbering idiocy. They finally drove me up to the camp fairly late after dinner.

"Good God!" said Father.

"Oh, how awful!" said Mother, when they saw my new home close up. I suppose it looked pretty dreary and forbidding in the dark. To them it was a cluster of wooden huts dumped down in a field on a hill—gloomy and primitive and horrible. But, of course, I hadn't had a chance to look at it in quite the same way. It had been represented to me as

the Headquarters of the military organization in which I was immersed up to the neck. I regarded the accommodation without enthusiasm but took its primitiveness for granted.

Just before they went away my father asked me if I needed any money. I didn't. I was practically the Diamond Jim Brady of our Platoon. There was a man who had a car and a bicycle, but I was the only man in all the troops stationed at Dorchester who consistently patronized the local hotels. Of course, there must have been a number of people with far more money than I had, but they didn't seem to use it. For the price of taking someone to the theatre and having dinner afterwards in London you could live like a king in Dorchester for a week. I was fortunate in having a bit of money put by. My principle of thrift has always been to save enough money to enable me to live for a year at exactly the same standard as I was living at the point when fired, maimed or conscripted. It is a sound principle. I recommend it.

. . . . .

Our daily routine soon settled into pattern. I believe reveille was at 6.15, but we didn't get up until nearer seven o'clock. The first practical attempts to rouse us were from the N.C.O.'s, who had sleeping-out passes in the town and had to report into the camp very punctually at a prodigiously early hour in order not to lose this privilege. There was one wealthy helot among the recruits who also slept out. The N.C.O.'s nearly all had Welsh or West-country accents. There was one fat corporal who was usually the centre of these celebrations. He would come in and clump his way up and down the room, pulling off the blankets and making all the usual early-morning jokes.

"Roize and shoine. It's what cooms of thik yere luxury beds. It's vicious lying yere, that's what it be—vicious. Coom arn. Roize 'n shoine. Jello!"

Jello was the word they used for 'double up'; I think it comes from India.

There were no taps in the camp except one, which sprung mysteriously out of the side of the hill and was always surrounded by people and mud—inches deep. It wasn't easy to wash or shave.

The proper wash place was about half a mile through the rest of the half-built and, as yet, untenanted hutted camp; down a hill to a piece of open ground. There were half a dozen rows of wooden trestle-work wash-stands, each about thirty feet long, with taps at intervals. On a lovely morning it was pleasant to wash in the open air. On a non-lovely morning it was not at all pleasant. When it was cold I used to walk a little further and go to the old wash-house we had used during our first eight weeks. This was properly fitted up with mirrors and hot water, but it was forbidden ground, and if identified as belonging to another Company you were liable to be reported and punished. The only thing is that no one feels much like identifying and punishing people at that time of day when aggressiveness and self-confidence are at their lowest ebb.

Breakfast was served out in the open air. Usually the weather was fine. It was that wonderful 1940 summer. Our eating equipment wasn't lavish. We had a knife, fork and spoon and a tin bowl. For breakfast we usually had porridge, a bit of bacon and fried bread, then bread and

jam or marmalade and, of course, the rich, dark brown, treacly Army tea which bears no relation to any other tea, but appeals to me. I managed to get a tin plate after a day or two, but until I had thus supplemented the official arrangements, eating a meal required a certain amount of planning, unless you were content to throw the whole thing into your tin bowl and eat it as a kind of porridge and bacon salad. The queue for meals was about 80 yards long at its maximum. The way to deal with queues is either to come very early or come very late and take a chance on there being anything left. Often, of course, there might be plenty left; it depended on how frugal the mess orderlies had been. We had to take it in turns to be mess orderlies, which involved fetching the food from a cook-house, located, for no reason that I could see, about half-way across the county, over rich and loamy agricultural land. The process of washing up the dishes was again difficult, as there was no hot water. You could get so far scraping them out with grass, but it wasn't altogether satisfactory. Young Daly just never bothered; he kept a clean bowl for inspections and another one for use which was never washed—except partially, by the passage of subsequent food or tea—from one week to another.

"If they treat me like a pig, I'm going to act like a pig," he said.

After breakfast we had P.T. From a medical point of view it was undoubtedly the wrong way round, and is, I believe, officially forbidden. No doubt if I had indulged in violent exercises immediately after a meal in civil life I should have felt the worse for it, but many of these natural laws don't seem to apply in the Army. They seem to be able to ill-treat you with medical impunity. We did P.T. as a company, accompanied by those high-pitched, nasal, sexless, zealot voices.

"Warn, tew, three; warn, tew, three; warn, tew, three. When I say change keep circling in the same manner with the left leg and right arm. Keep the stomach in and the head out. Warn, tew; three. CHANGE. Warn, tew, three. Now what's the matter with the last man in the third row? Swing properly with a warn, tew, three."

The first thing after this was Morse reading. We sat there with pencils and scraps of paper reading the messages tapped out by the sergeant. They might be this kind of thing—"Rations consumption 8 June delivered Chichester 0430 hours 14 June. Submit future indents your Battalion H.Q. Petrol available cans Brigade." Or they might be from a newspaper, like this—"A big offensive against the U-boats is on the way, I have been seeing the preparations for it. Scotland Yard are to help the local police in their enquiries into the death of a thirty-three-year-old woman whose body was found in a garage."

The speeds were gradually working up. When we started, two or three words a minute seemed bewilderingly fast. After a week or two, the same speed was disconcertingly slow. You even made more mistakes because your attention had time to wander. It is a good training in mental concentration. Complete attention to the dots and dashes is necessary—at least at first. Later on, when my attention had been wandering and I hadn't been concentrating on the sending of a particular word, I could concentrate in retrospect and successfully remember it.

Then we might have a lecture on procedure. The business of sending messages in Morse is complicated to the *n*th degree, to guard, as far as possible, against dim-witted misinterpretations. So you always start a

message with the letters VE, which means "I have a message for you," and you end it with AR, which means "End of transmission." DU is a hyphen, K means "Go on", KK means "brackets", W means "Your signals are too weak". There is a great range of these telegraphic shorthand signs and endless numbers of procedures to be complied with. For instance, it is most important that there should be no error in receiving figures. A mistake in a map reference might have disastrous consequences, so there has to be a special figure check at the end of any message in which figures occur.

Following a lecture on these lines we went out for a period of visual signalling. We marched out in a crocodile over on to the other side of the hill and lay down on the ground in pairs about twenty yards apart with one sitting facing up the hill, the other man facing down. The view downhill was of the valley of the River Frome, a lot of fields and then some farm buildings, with a country road to the right. We already knew this particular piece of countryside in remarkable detail because it had been used as the guinea-pig landscape for all our elementary training in distance judging and fire orders. The N.C.O. operating the lamp had cycled off some time before, and presently the lamp started flashing out there in the back of the landscape. The business of reading visual signals is more difficult than reading Morse by sound, but countrymen and ex-gamekeepers tend to come out stronger than they do indoors.

Then we had some flag drill. This wasn't quite so much fun. A signal flag isn't very heavy but it is fiendishly hard work to operate. After dinner we spent a happy afternoon laying cables across a river bed. This is a deplorable pastime. You do it fully dressed in fatigue clothes, and as the afternoon draws on and the sun goes in, the water gets colder, the cables become more and more recalcitrant, and the stones on which you cut your hands become sharper. When you have finally established some flickering communication with the people at the other end of the landscape the sergeant then goes and cuts the wire at points, which you have to find and repair. After rolling up the cable we were then free to be so late for tea that there was extremely little to eat, but not late enough to miss the anti-flat feet exercises which were conducted over in the gymnasium.

I went to a dance in the evening held in a Church Hall. The same small proportion of the military and civilian population made the bulk of the attendance at all these dances. I danced with a young woman who was by way of being the local beauty queen. She had only been to London once, when she went up with another girl for the week-end. They had saved up for some time. They had no idea about where to stay, and finally stayed in a rather disreputable establishment in the Leicester Square area. They arrived on the Friday night, and spent the Saturday morning going for bus rides round the West End. They spent most of the week-end at the Hammersmith Palais, and returned by the last train on Sunday night.

One afternoon I was sent for in a great hurry, to be interviewed as an O.C.T.U. candidate. There were half a dozen of us from various Companies. We had to wait outside an office.

The Board consisted of the Second-in-Command, another Major and

the young Adjutant, all of them figures of inaccessible grandeur by my standards. The other candidates were in a state of considerable nervousness, but personally I found it rather exhilarating. I marched in and saluted with all the verve and technique of which I was capable. "Right, stand easy, Cotterell," said the Major. "Now, why do you want to be an officer?" I said that I thought it would be more interesting, because as an officer you had a better idea of what was going on. This seemed to be a fairly suitable reply, unlike one man, who said: "Well, you get an easier time, better food, there isn't so much to do and you get a batman to clean your buttons. I don't think there is any comparison."

"You were a journalist, eh?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you like it?"

"Yes, sir."

"I knew a writer chap once. Do you know anyone named Gibson, on *The Autocar*?"

"I think I did once meet him, sir," I said, to fit in.

"I think he was on the advertising side."

"Oh yes, sir. Well, of course, we didn't see a great deal of them."

"What did you do, then? Just go about writing about people?"

"That's about it, sir."

"You must have met some very interesting people," said the Adjutant.

"I can never think how they find enough to fill the papers every day," said the other Major.

"Oh, fires and murders—that kind of thing," said the Major. "Did you go on those?"

"I didn't do much of that, actually, sir."

"Pretty easy, isn't it, just writing up stuff in journalese?" said the Adjutant.

Part of each morning routine was cleaning our rifles. Directly after breakfast there was an inspection. We had to pull a piece of slightly oily rag through the barrel two or three times until the bore was completely clean, then we had to go all over the working parts, cleaning away every speck of dust or grime which had accumulated during the past twenty-four hours. There were no half larks about this morning inspection of ours. It wasn't just a case of household dusting. Total cleanliness was the standard. I was lucky to have an easy barrel, which could be cleaned quite quickly even after firing. Some barrels required about six times the amount of work and were still filthy. Little things like that can make quite a difference. We also had to keep the bayonet oiled and clean. I didn't mind the actual bayonet but I couldn't get anywhere with the scabbard. Cleaning the scabbard involved the manufacture of a rich, cleaning paste made by spitting on boot polish. Then you rubbed and polished either against the grain or with the grain, whichever theory you favoured, until it was time to go to bed. I suppose there must have been a knack to it which I couldn't capture. There was a preliminary process called boning which included an arm-aching massage with the back of a toothbrush until the scabbard was reduced to a state of uniform

cleanliness. If you didn't do this, then it didn't matter how much polish you put on or how long you polished; it was still immediately evident to the inspecting eye that you hadn't boned it, which you were immediately required to do. I went on doing the wrong things in the wrong order until finally our corporal did it for me. The correct way to avoid criticism for a thing like this is not to wait until your own failure is pointed out, but to get right in there and complain that the authorities have failed to teach you properly—though, of course, this is a formula to be used with a certain finesse and tactical charm.

As the weeks went by our course became more complicated. We were involved in group exercises in which we were split up in pairs, each supposed to be operating a signal office. Each pair had a Morse sending and receiving set and we had to send each other a series of signals. We also had to learn to operate a telephone exchange.

Life went on. We began to feel very much a part of the local neighbourhood; new intakes of recruits were arriving every few weeks, whom we regarded tolerantly. Daly was becoming known as a great sleeper. Sometimes our training was interrupted for such irrelevancies as trench-digging. There were beginning to be quite a few air raids in the neighbourhood and we had to dig trenches to shelter in and—what was worse—we had to shelter in them. Whenever the siren went we were all marched out to stand there in six inches of water with no conviction of improved security whatsoever.

I didn't enjoy digging the trenches. They were dug in a triangle of sunken land formed by our huts as the base with a road and a railway line as the two remaining sides of the triangle. It wasn't that I didn't approach these jobs in the right spirit. I approached digging as constructively as I could, working industriously and trying to appreciate the pleasures of straightforward manual work in the open air. As I dug I kept thinking how creditable it was that, after a life of almost total physical inactivity, I was able to dig with the best of them. The trouble was that I couldn't dig with the best of them for long. It wasn't only the weariness which assailed me, it was the dullness. Daly, on the other hand, was uninterested from the start. He didn't even try to be interested. He simply stood there leaning on his spade, keeping an eye cocked for our many superintendents. There must have been about two hundred of us doing this digging. One did twenty minutes with a pick and then rested while the others did twenty minutes with the shovel. Life was certainly much easier with a pick and it was even easier when we hit on the formula of resting when our picks were resting and joining another resting group of picks when our lot went back into the trenches. Then I separated the head of my pick from the handle and, carrying it in a purposeful way, as if on my way to have it repaired, walked off along the road across the barrack square into the N.A.A.F.I., where I had a cup of tea along with several other men of initiative and resource. No one ever thinks to question a man who is carrying something if he looks as if he has been ordered to carry it. I think the secret is to look resentful, as if you didn't want to go where you were being sent.

I had been invited out to dinner at Upwey, down near Weymouth, about eight miles away. It was a little village quite a way off the bus route to Weymouth, but I was anxious to go. I therefore entered into an

arrangement to hire a racing bicycle. It was a complicated machine of considerable value, so the owner gave me to understand. Certainly he was very proud of it. He was always tinkering about with it, oiling it, cleaning it, taking parts of it to bits, and wrapping it up in one of his blankets at night. It was a bright yellow colour, very light-weight, with low racing handlebars and the minimum superstructure. A machine designed and geared for speed, it seemed to me to be just the thing. He agreed to hire it out to me the night before, but he wasn't at all happy about it. He kept asking me whether I would be all right, and what would happen if anything went wrong. I assured him that I was an experienced and bold cyclist with hundreds of hours a wheel to my credit. He was still very doubtful. He came down to see me off; in fact there was quite a little crowd. I pushed it down the rough stone approach to the camp into the road outside and mounted.

I was half-way down the road before I knew where I was. I daredn't dismount and, for that matter, couldn't, as the hill was quite steep and, on investigation, there appeared to be no brakes. I tried to look back for guidance—it was only the sheer momentum which recovered my balance. I couldn't see anything except my madly revolving feet, for my head was, of course, bent double over the fiendish handlebars. I knew that everything would be well so long as there were no curves in the road or any oncoming traffic. I looked up to check my position and saw the barracks racing by. A little way ahead there were three officers. I had been told that the correct drill for this situation was to ride at attention and stare straight ahead; it seemed rather discourteous not to slow down a little also as otherwise the salute would be lost in the rush—I therefore stopped pedalling and was thrown off the bicycle into the gutter.

A week before I had hired the fat corporal's bicycle, which was very old, very slow and very difficult to pedal; I was sorry now that I hadn't hired it again; it was very much more my speed. In the end it took me much longer to get there with this fifth-dimensional projectile than it had on the corporal's bone-shaker. The journey to Weymouth from Dorchester is mainly a switchback. It was more strenuous pedalling downhill on this machine than up; you had to work like a mad thing to avoid being precipitated to high-speed destruction. I tried taking my feet off the pedals when going downhill and found it impossible to get them on again to control the thing without being thrown into the ditch, which I was several times. It was not a very successful excursion.

I was going to dinner at a perfectly delightful house, with all the comforts which are totally lacking in a camp. The properly furnished bathroom, the books and bottles, the gramophone records and manicured hands, the scent and voice were very welcome. Women are a great idea. You don't realize how arid a barrack room is until you are reminded that the other kind of life still goes on.

## 4

## I LIKE A MAN WHO SMOKES A PIPE

I WASN'T AT ALL CONFIDENT ABOUT BEING SENT TO O.C.T.U. WHEN YOU are conscripted you abandon any previous confidence in the smooth running of your affairs. You expect everything to go wrong. After all, when you are a conscript infantry private, sleeping on a wooden floor and queuing with a tin bowl for your meals, the world doesn't exactly seem a conspiracy for your personal advancement. You largely lose the power of self-assertion, though if you manage to retain it you can use it sometimes with remarkable effect in managing your destinies. For instance, the man I spoke about a little earlier on who had been dispossessed of his garage by his brother. He came to me one day as if he had seen a revelation and said that his brother had arrived in the town, posted to the same depot. It wasn't by chance. He had added his name to a list and posted himself. He claimed to move about the country fairly freely on this system. On one occasion he had unfortunately moved himself on to a troopship. He made his way to protest and with his devil's luck heard one of the authorities saying that there was one man too many on board. He immediately reported sick and was sent ashore.

Time went by. The weather got warmer. You could read in the fields in the evening very pleasantly. It sounds delightful in retrospect—healthy, simple and happy, but, of course, no state of human affairs is without its complications. My diary, *What! No Morning Tea?*, over which I had worked and worried so hard, was sent back rejected by Mr. Allen Lane. Writing in all its forms is a heart-aching business. The thing you have just written and, after the usual maddening interval, had turned down, looms over your personal horizon reeking of all the straining effort that, for the moment, looks like being wasted. Depression is a kind of almost physical numbness of the brain, an emotional state that practically paralyses the processes of rationalization which normally reconcile us to our shortcomings. There is nothing you can do about it because there is nothing you want to do about it. Subsequently I sent the book to an agent, who also returned it with a reader's report to the effect that it was a very ordinary account of recruit training in the Army, and since so many people were also undergoing it the experiences described in the book were well-known enough for them to have no commercial market value. I am happy to say that, at the time of writing, this agent is in gaol, where I wished him at the time.

But finally the veil lifted a little. I was told that I would probably be sent off to O.C.T.U. in the near future, and finally the order came, at very short notice one afternoon, that I was to go the following day. I entertained my immediate circle to some sort of drinking bout and made my farewells round the town. The whole thing seemed to me extremely momentous at the time. I regarded my conscription as a human drama of the first importance and depth. I saw myself as an unhappy marionette fighting bravely to survive. The whole thing seemed to me extremely poignant. It probably wasn't quite the right approach to a career in the Armed Forces.

Two others went to the O.C.T.U. when I did. One was a young school-master. You would suspect it at sight. He had the characteristic retarded vocabulary of the man among boys and wore his battle-dress blouse like a blazer. He smoked a pipe. I must say I like a man who smokes a pipe. The other one was a young West-country business man who had a keen sense of public relations and approached his military training with the ardour of a man learning to play by ear. He was determined that no one should laugh when he sat down.

The O.C.T.U. was at Aldershot. Of course, there is a lot to be said for Aldershot. It has several cinemas and plenty of shops; there are even one or two places where you can get a meal. But it was all fiendishly overcrowded. Everywhere was thick with troops and, while by no means inaccessible, it was quite a journey from our O.C.T.U. quarters to the town. Our quarters were solidly built peacetime Army bungalow barrack buildings intersected with proper roads and very tolerably furnished. You had a bed with a mattress and a tall green metal locker beside it. There were about fifteen of us in this room, and leading off it there was a study room equipped with reasonable chairs and a table. On the other side of the study room there was another room accommodating about the same number as our own. There was also a well-appointed wash-room. So from the accommodation point of view there wasn't much to grumble at. The trouble was not the quarters themselves, it was the endless repetition of them. As far as you could see, and as far as you were likely to want to walk in an evening, there were these endless lines of bungalow barrack buildings.

When we arrived we had to queue up to give our names, numbers and previous occupation to a row of officers. The officer to whom I went wouldn't have been out of place in a South American film. He had the right luxuriant black hair, not to mention the sideburns and moustache; he turned out to be my new Platoon Commander. On the other hand there was nothing South American about the Platoon Sergeant. He was physically and mentally a proper sergeant. He issued us with dozens of training pamphlets and note-books. I looked through them in a sort of dulled despair. He told us the most horrific stories of how much work we had in front of us. Everybody believed and improved on these stories. It seemed quite feasible; the whole atmosphere of the landscape for miles around was strictly regimental. It seemed unlikely that any tolerable human life could emerge from such a set-up.

We were marched down to a big wooden lecture hall to hear an opening address by our Company Commander, who was tall, broad and fearsomely military. There is nothing more forbidding than a face hidden behind a fine military moustache; it makes it so difficult to detect any sign of human sympathy. The Company Commander told us that we were no longer ordinary private soldiers; we were now potential officers, and perfection must therefore be our standard, particularly when walking out after duty. There must be no familiarity with other ranks, though, of course, it would be advisable not to carry this to any ridiculous lengths. However, we were subject to the same discipline as the ordinary private soldier, and in fact this would be even more rigorously applied. We should find that there were bars set aside for officers and cadets and we were advised to keep to these particular bars. He also warned us that

there were women in Aldershot, some of whom were not above reproach. Personally he couldn't understand any man who had the chance to hold the King's Commission losing his head over women; but there it was. There were also a large number of tailors' representatives in the town who would attempt to lure our custom with specious promises and beer. There were cases of men who had ordered their uniforms on the strength of their outfitting allowance and had then failed the course. You couldn't, in fact, be too careful.

"Four grades of cadets are turned out here," said the Company Commander: "Grade A, first-class chaps, above the average—any Battalion proud to have them; Grade B, good chaps and good value for anybody—any Battalion very pleased to have them; Grade C, good fellows, men you could trust, but perhaps not quite so quick as the others; nothing against them, of course, probably tried very hard but they hadn't quite got that little extra. Yes, all those three grades are very good chaps. And then," he said, with a tinge of disgust, "there's Grade D."

I was sorry he didn't say much about Grade D, because I had the feeling, rightly as it transpired, that that is what I would turn out to be. I was the only one in our Company.

We soon settled down to our new life, and a pretty horrible one it was. There is something about the process of qualification for commissioned rank which brings out the worst in most people. Careerism rears its nasty head; careerism is all very well on a grand scale but is a pretty unpleasant affair in its obscurer reaches. There was an undercurrent of anxiety over trifles, mental indigestion caused by trying to learn too much too quickly, very hard work and strenuous attempts to please. An O.C.T.U. is the perfect playground for the fancy note-book character, the man who loves to spend his evening writing up notes on the lectures he has heard during the day and illustrating his usually wooden, inaccurate reports of what the lecturer said with multi-coloured diagrams. We had a number of young men who really enjoyed this kind of thing. They sat in the front rows at the lectures asking questions designed to demonstrate their grasp of the subject, laughing like drains at any attempted joke by the lecturer, scribbling notes as furiously as any woman undergraduate, and being generally appalling. They worked and strained to ingratiate themselves with their instructors, and I sometimes wondered at how easily the instructors seemed to be deceived; but later, when I came to do a bit of instructing myself, I realized the point that you are so anxious to establish a response from your audience that you sincerely welcome the ingratiating interruptions which you deplored so much as a member of the audience. There is nothing so encouraging as a little "Yes, sir," and "No, sir," and "Ha ha, sir."

But probably these rather bitter feelings were prompted by jealousy, for personally I am no good at drawing diagrams. They used to take us out and station us in front of a piece of landscape and tell us to draw a panorama sketch map of it. While all the others were deftly summarizing the topographical features I would laboriously, with dropped, hopeless jaw, produce the kind of thing I could have done equally well at the age of six. I hadn't even the confidence to misrepresent the scenery; my outlines and labels quavered and tailed off indecipherably. Perspective and proportion had I none.

The general routine of the O.C.T.U. was that during the first weeks we learned the elements of foot drill and rifle drill and gradually worked up to tactical problems, with a strong background of lectures and demonstrations. We started right at the beginning. The first day on the square we were taught to stand to attention. We were a little puzzled by this, seeing that we would never have been sent to the O.C.T.U. if we hadn't been able to stand to attention satisfactorily. We also had that well-worn lecture which starts "This is the rifle . . ." We were standing in a circle round the sergeant and opposite me there was a cadet who had been in the Army ten years. He had just come back from France, where he had been a platoon sergeant and had often acted as platoon officer. I well recall the expression on his face when the sergeant said "This is the rifle . . ." When we had finished drilling on the square we would do weapon training on the football field. Then perhaps a lecture on compass marching by night; then a break, then P.T. It was all very much like a hotbed-up version of our recruit training, but with the added nervous strain of living up to much higher standards. There was none of the old slap-happy approach. Everything was grim and dutiful and humourless. Of course, this can't last long in any situation. You find your level in the back row of the squad and adjust yourself.

There were small compensations. We had to make our beds but we didn't have to pick up bits of paper round the house and we didn't have to queue up for our food. It was served out to us in a large and not uncomfortable dining hall and we didn't have to carry our knife, fork and plate to a meal. The table was even laid. There were also quite extensive and well-kept bath-houses. I was coming back from a bath one evening after we had been there a few weeks when I came across a queue of men in civilian clothes. They were the last remnants of the direct commissioning system, come straight to O.C.T.U. from civilian life. Half-way down the queue there were two familiar faces—Geoffrey Cox and John Grime, both from the *Daily Express*. Come to think of it, Geoffrey wasn't in civilian clothes, he had already been a few days in the New Zealand Army. He had covered several wars and won a great name for himself as a war correspondent, but he didn't look like a man with a great name at the moment. John Grime had been the dramatic critic. They were both pathetically pleased to see a familiar face, and treated me with more than usual respect, perhaps afraid that I might twist their arm or report them to the prefects. Also in the queue I noticed a man who is quite noted as a divorce lawyer. Standing in the queue he looked quite incapable of conducting his own affairs, let alone anyone else's.

The man who slept in the bed opposite to me was an absolutely champion lead-swinger; he was a plausible talker with unlimited confidence and he fixed things for himself to a quite extraordinary degree, sent himself telegrams asking for himself to be sent on leave for business reasons, wrote himself letters on his firm's notepaper and I don't know what—and got away with everything.

We spent a lot of time out on the training ground studying the general principles of attack, defence, advance and withdrawal, each process being remarkably like the other. We selected lines of advance and studied

stalking and the use of cover. We walked miles and miles over the undulating, gorse-infested countryside around Aldershot. We attacked and advanced on each other from every possible angle and at all hours of the day and night. We also spent a lot of time digging a tank ditch and constructing wire fences as part of the Bingham Line, so called after our Commanding Officer, which was designed against the currently expected German invasion. We spent a lot of time clearing fields of fire by hacking down woods. This gives a very enjoyable play to one's destructive instincts. I usually worked with a young North-countryman who had been in the hotel business. He had been sent straight to O.C.T.U. on his way to some Intelligence job. He wasn't more than twenty-five, I suppose, but he hadn't been home for about six years. He had worked in Jerusalem, Cairo, St. Moritz, Rome and all stations to Barking, learning the hotel business, in which he was whole-heartedly interested, though it had involved all kinds of vicissitudes and discomforts. As a result, of course, he was much less disconcerted by the switch to Army life than most of us. He said that he was treated with much more consideration than he had been in the hotel business. He was one of those rootless people with unlimited acquaintances but apparently no friends and no need of any.

I became very friendly with a young man who had just got married on what seemed to me a rather unsteady financial basis. I am all for love, but not on the kind of dole which most of us have to put up with in the Army. He had a considerable, if not original, intelligence. He realized that some people have a fuller, pleasanter life than others and wanted to devise such a life for himself, but was handicapped in doing so by the usual obstacle of a steady but ill-remunerated job. If he worked hard and cultivated the appropriate people he would do very well a little bit later on. But, of course, like any young man of some spirit he wanted to eat the apples now. I lent him a book, *Love in our Time* by Norman Collins, which described how a young man who got married on a modest income was gradually obliged to abandon all his youthful habits and settle down to a very ordinary married life, which, after all the worries and troubles of trying to maintain his pre-marriage standards of living, he was very glad to do. I thought this young man would enjoy reading the book, but it frightened the life out of him; he accused me of trying to upset him.

It is funny how, when you enter a new community, whether it be a ship or an hotel or a job, everyone looks exaggeratedly horrible at first. And, as I said, the O.C.T.U. does not bring out people's pleasantest qualities. But while the unpleasant urge to be top boy still persisted in some quarters, the rest of us developed the usual bond bred of common difficulties. Life was full of minor irritations; we had to fall in and be marched to a lecture, then fall in and be marched away again. Instead of webbing equipment we wore a dreadful system of leather boxes, which made our crawling about the countryside extremely uncomfortable. We also had an operational role, which was to defend the neighbourhood against attack. One of our concerns about the German attack was that if they were going to do it they should do it quickly and enable us to leave the O.C.T.U. We had to man road blocks. My usual role was to stand in a pillbox with my rifle pointed up a railway line.

We had to do this for an hour just before and about dawn, as the Germans were expected to land on these shores at that time. The only flaw in the arrangement that I could detect was that by the time they came thundering up the Aldershot road we should have gone home to breakfast.

We had to take it in turns to go through the motions of platoon officer and platoon sergeant to our platoon of cadets. Military training is one long charade. You have to be able to pretend that live men are dead and dead ammunition is alive and take the consequent military problems to heart. Whenever I was on tactical exercises I could never get over the feeling that it was never really going to happen, and if it did it wouldn't be like this. I only shone once. We were supposed to be advancing across rising wooded country to capture a farmhouse held by the enemy. This picture had been painted to the Cadet Platoon Commander of the day, who, after due care and deliberation, had decided, like every Cadet Platoon Commander before and after him, to advance in the novel and surprising formation known as two up and one back. He gave orders to the cadet section leaders to lead on in arrowhead formation up the hill. We started off on this caper and after advancing for ten minutes the instructors announced that we were being fired on and asked the Cadet Platoon Commander what he was going to do about it.

Of course we had all dropped down on the ground. I found myself sprawled in a little channel lined with grass leading towards some blackberry bushes. I crawled along and started eating the blackberries while the tactical situation was being resolved. I ate all the blackberries in the first lot and caught sight of some particularly attractive ones a little further along, though to get at them involved penetrating some brambles. Using my tin hat as a snow plough, I wormed my way forward as painlessly as possible, intent on the fruit. I was just reaching out my greedy hand when I suddenly had the feeling that there were people in the room—I looked up to find our C.O., the subsequently famous Colonel Bingham, and his aides.

"First class," he said—"first class. The only man I've seen with any grasp of what's wanted. I want you to do that again," he said to me. "So that the others can watch. A good bit of scouting."

## 5

### "GOING TO THE 12TH BY ANY CHANCE?"

I WENT HOME ON A FRIDAY. IT WAS NEARLY A YEAR SINCE I HAD GONE away to war. But instead I was going home to war. The train out from London was late. But, then, it always was. There was the same old porter wheezing along slamming the doors, unchanged except for his tin hat.

The main street was empty. I passed no one but an A.R.P. warden and a policeman. Up above, things had been quiet, but now they were hotting up. The barrage was on and in the flashes you could see the ruins of the row of shops which Mother had written to say had been destroyed.

Home looked just the same. I pushed open the door and walked into



IN DAYLIGHT BOWING THERE IS A LOT OF THIS—



—BEFORE YOU SEE SOMETHING LIKE THIS

the dark, empty hall. "Come on down, we're in the cellar," Mother called up.

I walked downstairs into a new way of living. Mother and Father were in the coal cellar, both in bed and fully dressed. And in a third bed there was Mrs. Long, wife of the doctor across the road. Their house had been destroyed by incendiary bombs, her children evacuated and her husband was the head A.R.P. doctor, so if he got any sleep he got it round at the squash courts, which were now the A.R.P. Headquarters. So she slept in our cellar. She arrived about 9 p.m. with her knitting and the *Daily Telegraph*. "I haven't had time to read it during the day," she always said.

Mother got up to get me something to eat. "It's lovely to see you, darling," she said placidly. The kitchen walls were shaking as the guns barraged around us and a German aircraft droned overhead.

"Aren't you frightened?" I said.

"Well, I was at first. I was afraid to come in here alone, but now I don't mind."

Father came in to watch me eat. He had been outside scouting around. "I thought I heard something hit the roof, and you've got to watch out for those small incendiary bombs," he said.

"What are your reactions to all this?" I asked him.

"Horror and terror," he said. "But the funny thing is you worry more about your house than yourself."

When we went down again I went into the other cellar. They hadn't told me, but my Aunt Doris was sleeping there. I hadn't seen her since she went to New Zealand ten years before. She had come back to England to be a nurse. "She hasn't changed a bit," I said, which woke her up.

"Why, hullo, Anthony, you haven't changed a bit," she said, and went to sleep again. My brother arrived next day on week-end leave.

After breakfast I walked with Mother while she made her round of calls collecting for national savings. She was the collector for our road. First, little Mrs. Baker next door. Then, Mrs. Wheeler, then the next house owned by an elderly lady named Miss Howard. But there wasn't anything left of it. Miss Howard was sleeping on the top floor. She always said she didn't believe in shelters, and she was buried a few days later. Her house was divided into two flats, and some friends of ours, the Browns, used to live in the lower flat, but they were away because Mr. Brown was convalescing from sciatica. We stopped and looked. There was nothing but a heap of rubble.

We played golf, Father, Geoffrey, Mr. Townley and I, and the only difference was that the guns were going off intermittently; and as Father was playing out of the bomb crater at the sixth, Mr. Townley pointed up and said, "Look, there's a dog-fight going on." But though Geoffrey and I wanted to watch, the civilians were too blasé, the fight had to be over their noses before they gave it a second glance. Besides, two women playing behind were shouting "Fore", so we had to go on.

It was dusk on Monday afternoon. Mother and Father had just driven Geoffrey off to town on his way back to camp. "I can't bear to think what I shall feel when you're both gone again," Mother said. When they had gone I sat in the lounge and played old gramophone records. 'Two Sleepy People', 'These Foolish Things', 'You Go to my

Head'—they were all sodden with nostalgia and significance. Jokes and parties, love affairs and quarrels, came tumbling back to mind; the sentimental trivia of an age that ended while we were sitting on the lawn that Sunday morning in September nineteen thirty-nine.

It was getting dark and the guns had started. Somewhere overhead I could hear a droning enemy 'plane. I supposed I had better go and do the blackout.

I had been told to report to Tenby in South Wales. We had been given various instructions on how to behave in our new role before we left the O.C.T.U. We weren't to return salutes with the same fanatic vigour which we had used in giving them, we were to let our hair grow a little longer, and it was suggested that we might even manicure our hands from time to time. I was running over these considerations in my mind when I found myself addressed by a Captain in my new Regiment, the Royal Fusiliers. He had appeared in the corner seat opposite mine shortly after we left Paddington.

"Just joined?"

"Yes, sir."

"Thought so; tell by your kit—all new, what?"

"Yes, sir."

"Going to the 12th by any chance?"

"No, the 11th."

"Oh, pity, I'm from the 12th myself. Still, very nice crowd the 11th, very fine crowd—had a lot to do with them. First-class lot. You'll like them. Topping crowd."

"Oh, good, sir."

"Yes, if I wasn't in the 12th I'd like to be in the 11th, I really would. I've seen a lot of them. First-class crowd. Really frightfully nice. Sure you'll be very happy with them." He went on pretty well like this for about 200 miles.

We had been told to look for the truck which would probably have been sent to meet us, and ask to be taken to the Orderly Room, where we should report to the Adjutant. But I caught the afternoon train and didn't arrive until around midnight, when, naturally enough, there was no one to meet me. I had to find my way through the small and sleeping town to the Coburg Hotel, and do a good deal of banging on the door before it was opened by a half-dressed soldier who let me in to an interior crowded with Victoriana. He didn't know where I was to sleep and was unable to find out by waking three or four men who were sleeping on the floor of a lounge just off the main hall. I said that if he would get me a blanket I would doss down on the floor, but he didn't like the idea of this, so we set out to look for an empty room. He knocked in thunderous fashion on the first door we came to, opened the door and stood aside for me to make my own arrangements. Directly I saw the Major's uniform on the chair I knew that it would be better to try some other room. The Major, a martial figure even in his pyjamas, wasn't at all pleased to have been disturbed. I withdrew hastily before the full tide of his resentment found expression. After knocking at two more doors with similar results we found a room tenanted by a very vivacious little man who jumped up in bed, welcomed me with fervour,

ordered the batman to make a cup of tea and some sandwiches, and found me a bed.

It was extraordinary to wake next morning and be able to get up in one's own time without being shouted at. The welcome stranger's batman brought me a cup of tea, and to reinforce the sense of unrealism there was even a suggestion that I might like a bath.

The officers' mess was, for the moment, billeted in this very comfortable hotel. There was a lounge set aside as an ante-room and a very large table for us, dominating the dining-room. It was the sort of hotel where the dining-room is called the coffee room. The food was excellent, but, of course, I was far too nervous to appreciate this for the moment. Extraordinary how bad people are about making newcomers feel at home. There is a definite distrust of cordial overtures. I was introduced to the people sitting on either side and opposite me, who each in turn conscientiously engaged me in conversation. They all seemed to be extremely interested in what games I played. My heart sank at the thought of being compelled to play games on top of everything else. They sounded really concerned, you would have thought that they were games mad. But apparently not so; I never saw the people who asked me these questions play any games themselves or do anything but attempt to evade any suggestion that they should.

After breakfast I was conducted through the town to the Battalion Orderly Room, which was in a house just off the extremely attractive sea front. The Adjutant was a relatively mature, quite pleasant-looking individual with a moustache. The C.O. was very upright, very military, rather shy, complete with an Army moustache and a prominent sense of integrity. They asked me what I had done so far in the Army; they were excited to hear that I had been a signaller. The Signals Officer had gone on a six weeks' course and they were looking for a deputy, which I was immediately appointed.

For the time being I was to be an ordinary Rifle Platoon Commander. For lay benefit it should perhaps be explained that an infantry battalion at this time consisted of a dozen rifle platoons, whose business it was to fight, pure and simple, and a number of specialist platoons grouped together into a Headquarters Company, including those concerned with transport, administration and communication. In the meantime I was taken round the corner to a requisitioned boarding-house where 'Y' Company was billeted. The Company office was downstairs in the basement. At first sight the Company Commander seemed rather formidable, but I was used to people being formidable. What was so unnerving was his politeness. Within strict limits this bristling Major treated me as a human being—after life in the ranks I couldn't understand it.

My platoon, to which I was presently introduced, was engaged on that well-known Army activity, I.E., or interior economy. This consists of cleaning up the billet and one's personal effects and is a relatively popular pastime because of the scope it gives for solving the personal equation between activity and inclination. They were scrubbing out the billets. The atmosphere in a requisitioned seaside boarding-house which is being scrubbed out on a winter's morning has many of the more depressing qualities of washing day in an industrial town.

I was introduced to my fellow subalterns. I think one had been a

barrister and the other had worked in some kind of office. The barrister prided himself on being competent in an unorthodox way, the other one was anxious to be competent in a very orthodox way. My first activity as a subaltern was to hold an inspection of the men's boots. A pair of Army boots may last one month without repair, they may last four—the average infantryman's boot lasts about ten weeks before it needs soling and healing. Men who spend their lives driving trucks wear out boots on the clutch and brake pedals nearly as quickly. I came across one man whose boots were in a shocking condition; obviously he hadn't had them studded, or rather hadn't had the studs replaced when they fell out, and the leather was all dried up.

"Been drying them in a fire, have you?" I said.

He denied this strongly, of course. I found it difficult to feel indignant with people these first few days. I still looked upon myself as a private, and was consequently diffident about playing my new part and surprised that people seemed to take me seriously. After having done nothing but receive orders for so long it was difficult to give them. But subordination is the essence of an army. In the ranks you are completely subordinate to a sergeant, but when you get back from a few months at an O.C.T.U. the same sergeant, if you meet him, is equally subordinate to you. The funny thing is that he even feels as subordinate to you as you once did to him. It doesn't matter how many mistakes you make or how stupidly and ludicrously you make them, if you can manage to keep a straight face and stand up straight for just two minutes running, the spirit of discipline and respect comes running back.

Half-way through the morning the other subaltern took me back to the hotel to see the room which I was to share with him. It was a long narrow room on an upper floor overlooking the sea, and very comfortable indeed. On the question of a batman he said there was a man in the Company who wanted to be one and I had better try him.

Barter had never been a batman before he started looking after me, but as I had never been an officer before, we started about equal. He was rather lugubrious-looking, but I dare say I was too.

"I only hope I'll be all right, sir," he said nervously at our first meeting.

"I'm sure you will, Barter," I said jovially, but inwardly not too confident. I would have preferred someone a little more authoritative about the business of preparing an officer for his various roles. If Barter didn't know how to arrange my equipment I was in no position to show him. I counselled him to imitate what the other batmen did in every detail, and he didn't do too badly at all. He was at least conscientious and willing. There was something very companionable and homely about Barter. We both came from London and we had both been conscripted a few months ago; quite a range of mutual experience.

I found it difficult to get into the way of ruining his evening; I kept wanting to go out of my way not to inconvenience him by giving him things to clean. I couldn't feel comfortable about what seemed like his half-witted anxiety to anticipate my whims.

The general level of intelligence and amiability in the mess was quite pleasantly high. They seemed to be mostly lawyers or something of the kind.

Tenby was an excellent place to be stationed in, the amenities being rudimentary but varied, the setting picturesque and the weather consistently warm for the time of year.

For the first week there was nothing but scrubbing, sweeping, scouring, cleaning, practising inspecting and cursing because on the Friday the Brigadier was to make his annual inspection of the Battalion.

Apart from rifle and fighting equipment every man was supposed to have forty-nine items of personal stuff issued by the Army, including clothes, cleaning brushes, razor, socks and spare bootlaces.

I wrote it all down in a book, the men's names down the left-hand side of the page and the list of items across the top. Then I ruled it all off into squares and went round each man.

It is a maddening business. You can write off a man as all found quite happily on Monday, and by Tuesday morning he has lost his ground-sheet, and the woollen bundles which he showed you as socks turn out to have no heels or toes.

"And, sir, are they to do P.T., sir, without P.T. clothes? Their clothes are being washed, sir. And this man has no canvas fatigue suit, sir."

"What have you done with it?"

"I tore it, sir."

"What do you mean, you tore it?"

"Tore it on some barbed wire, sir, so I used it for dusters, sir."

"Do you mean you tore it so badly it wasn't fit for anything but dusters?"

"Yes, sir."

"You tore it yourself to make the dusters, you mean."

"It was tore, sir."

"Put him on a charge, Sergeant, for damaging Government property."

It was hard, but how else could you deal with a man who was so hopelessly inept at handling his affairs?

And after a week of scrubbing and nagging you marched out to the parade ground and found one fool who had forgotten his gas cape, and another who hadn't packed his ground-sheet.

It was a filthy day, blinding rain driving in from the hills and soaking every man. I stood there trying to remember how many married men there were in the Platoon, and how many had been on leave recently, and how many had had their homes bombed and how many were Territorials, and all the other answers a Brigadier might demand.

They were coming nearer now, the Brigadier and his attendants and the C.O. and the Adjutant, and all the other members of a perfect audience to make a fool of myself in front of. A stray couple of butterflies danced through my stomach.

"No. 3 Platoon—Tchun!" I shouted.

The great man had the assurance of a god, which, locally, he was. He walked slowly along the front rank scrutinizing each petrified face as if it were an identity parade.

"That's not the way to do your bootlaces," he said, menacingly incisive, pointing with his stick at a ruckled, loosened lace. Did you notice that when you inspected your platoon, Platoon Commander?"

"No, sir."

"Well, that's the sort of thing you ought to."

He walked on. He made a man lift his leg to inspect his boot side, and, of course, it needed repairing. He paused before a battledress that was conspicuously new even though rain-soaked.

"How long have you had that battledress?"

"Yesterday, sir."

The wrong thing, of course, for it to have been specially issued for the occasion. Then he was gone to another Company, and we marched off the field across the stone bridge.

. . . . .

We left the hotel and moved to a requisitioned house. It wasn't so comfortable or convenient as the hotel but it was relatively very good. I had now become Signals Officer, a position with all the advantages of a specialist's superiority. You immediately become a consultant instead of a general practitioner. With a little technical gibberish you can explain away practically anything. It is difficult for anyone to challenge your statement that so-and-so is out of the question, because they don't know what you are talking about, anyway.

In due course we left Tenby and moved to Malvern. We neared its hilly outskirts about 5.30 p.m. First impressions were not encouraging. A damp, chilly mist hung everywhere and it was early-closing day. Our convoy crawled through the streets eventually into a long avenue of solid boarding-house architecture, where we debussed. The quartermaster-sergeant came up and told me the Signals Platoon was billeted in a house called Fairlea, but on investigation I found the Carrier Platoon already in occupation. The quartermaster-sergeant had disappeared. No one else in sight knew anything; they were all enquiring for someone or something themselves. Eventually I came on an empty house and marched the platoon inside. After allotting them rooms, watching them get their meal and pointing out to them that the absence of blackout boards, apart from being an insoluble problem, was an admirable foil for the absence of electric light bulbs, and promising to do something about it in the morning, I eventually found the officers' mess.

It seemed a horrible place and for the moment deserted. I searched round for my room and found it; it was undoubtedly the most horrible of all, an attic with a roof window. I went downstairs and asked the mess corporal for dinner.

"No dinner, sir. We went to the station to get the things off the luggage train and the man fetched the wrong things in error."

I went out for a meal to one of the hotels, where I had a plate of Bovril, a mouthful of fish, some tired vegetables and a particularly nasty wine jelly, with a dubious lager and some unmentionable coffee, for eight shillings. There was no hot water next morning and no shaving mirror, but the men's billets, on daylight inspection, were excellent; enough space to have a recreation room. They spent the day fetching coal, scrubbing floors, cleaning windows and making the place fit to live in. Never, by any chance, does one take over a billet fit to live in—it is quite unknown, though every unit spends its last few days in a billet scrubbing it into a condition fit to hand over.

My main preoccupation while we were in Malvern was supervising the training of a reserve Signal Platoon. I also set about the very laborious

but fascinating job of exhaustively interviewing each unfortunate man in my platoon for about an hour. There were thirty main questions—How often do you get browned off? What bores you most about the Army? Would you like to go back to the same job after the war?—and so on. Incidentally, there is no better way of getting to know people very well in a short time than systematic interrogation. I tabulated the answers on two large sheets of squared paper. The whole thing was strictly meaningless but it kept me from being bored. I started writing what I hoped would be a long thoughtful article based on all this material. What with one thing and another it gradually grew into a book. My publisher wanted to call it *Oh! it's nice to be in the Army!* I was appalled at the idea of calling it *Oh! it's nice to be in the Army!* so we compromised and called it, *Oh! it's nice to be in the Army!* My ambition was to write a well-documented, thoughtful account of the social problems involved in non-operational military life, a problem in which I was very interested. I wanted to write a serious and, if possible, helpful little book, but it is difficult to establish a reputation for being serious and helpful with a book called *Oh! it's nice to be in the Army!*

I am sorry to keep on talking about my literary activities but they really did make a tremendous difference to my equanimity. You felt that you were at least keeping your personal end up, and the fact that you could write about things lent point to many maddeningly pointless activities.

I shan't quickly forget reading the letter telling me that the *Daily Express* had bought *What! No Morning tea?* for serialization. That was quite a moment. Life seemed to be starting all over again, for of course it automatically guaranteed that the book, which was coming out in a few days' time, wouldn't just lie down and die. I went on leave the same day and never felt happier in my life.

## 6

## WE WERE MOVING AGAIN

I CAME BACK FROM LEAVE ON THE FRIDAY NIGHT, NATURALLY FEELING very happy. Our mess, which had been a private house, looked rather barer than usual, though it could never be called over-furnished. It was a house of attics each with different wallpaper more horrible than the last, and the kind of truckle beds which collapse if you approach them the wrong way. There was only one bathroom, and this had no mirror. The floors and stairs were uncarpeted and framed in solignum borders. The stairs were steep and narrow, with ecclesiastically carved banisters.

I went up to my room; most of my things and the other man's were packed up on the floor. So we were moving again; there had been rumours before I went on leave. I unpacked a bit and went downstairs to the ante-room. All the furniture was gone except half a dozen Army chairs and a card table. Philip was sitting there as usual, spectaclled and quizzical.

"Hullo," he said. "You back. Have a good leave?"

"Yes, fine."

"Have a drink." He poured me out a glass of beer.

"I see we're moving, then," I said.

"So nothing escapes you," he said.

George came in. He used to be a bookie and he had been out with a girl.

"Hullo," he said. "Have a good leave?"

"Yes. How's the emotional side?"

"Fine," he said.

I went upstairs to bed: there was a man I had never seen before asleep in the bed opposite mine. I was just getting off to sleep when Lawson came in, a little loudly. "Hullo," he said. "Have a good leave?"

He woke me up, but it was not unpleasant to have people taking an interest. It helped to dilute the paranoic gloom of coming back; the feeling of being sucked back into circumstances quite out of control and almost certainly uncomfortable.

The Army. What a game!

Always waiting, and thinking about the past. Waiting in the cold dark outside call boxes.

Extraordinary comfort of primitive beds. Hours spent standing in fields; hours subtracted from any part of the twenty-four, perhaps around dawn, perhaps about midnight, perhaps all the appalling day. Just standing out in a field waiting for some unfortunates to advance over a hill. Waiting for the R.A.F. to give a demonstration, in the almost certain knowledge that it would be cancelled at the last minute. Then the long march back, the long way round. Dragging agony of equipment becoming progressively heavier and deader.

Our worldly and amusing padre. His efforts to do useful things and delight at shedding his collar. Then he was ill. I used to visit him in his room every morning after breakfast, to exchange Battalion gossip. He deplored the C.O.'s little jokes. His trouble was that he knew he wasn't taken seriously. Too intelligent not to read people's attitude. On convoys he and the doctor used to travel at the back together in the padre's little car. He was very intelligent, that padre. As a matter of fact the percentage of dimwits and undesirables in our Battalion mess was gratifyingly low. We had a mortar course run by our Mr. King and some of them were at first anxious to be lively. There were representatives from every unit in the Division and some of them were trying. But their heartiness didn't survive our athenaeum pall. They ate their meals hurriedly and left for the pretentious, uncomfortable pub up the road. Our dining-room was most uncomfortable and extremely cold, except by the fire, where you were roasted. Drink was the only solution, but a very pleasant solution after all.

It is perhaps worth putting on record that my train back from leave was ten minutes early at Reading. I do believe that is the first military journey I have ever made where the system ran early at any point. On the other hand, I have made many journeys where things were very late.

"They should be there, sir. Truck left an hour ago."

"Is the M.T. officer there?"

"No, sir. He's out, sir."

"Is the M.T. sergeant there?"

"He's gone to tea, sir. Corporal Farmer's here, sir. Would you like to speak to him?"

"Is that you, Corporal? Where the devil's this truck? We can't walk twenty-three miles; you know, or we're damned well not going to."

"Just a minute, sir. He's just checking the truck in to the proper place. Oh, sir, it wasn't sent to where you are at all. It went Coventry way, sir."

"Well, that's perfect. That's splendid, Corporal. That's another triumph for the M.T. section. Now what are your plans? Shall we stay here?"

"Well, I'll send the thirty hundredweight directly it gets back from the coal, sir."

"Haven't you got anything there now?"

"All off the road, sir."

"Well, for God's sake, Corporal, send what you can, will you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Put me over to the Adjutant."

"Yes, sir."

"Sir. Cotterell here, sir. I'm afraid we couldn't get those irons, sir. They wouldn't let them out without an order from Division, sir. . . . I know, sir. . . . I told them. Yes, I saw him, sir. He said he was sorry but no."

. . . . .

As I lay there in bed I couldn't say I was particularly pleased with the prospects. During my leave I had been seeing a good deal of the American and British newspaper people. They were all full of plans to go here and go there. You go to some extraordinary places in the Army, but under the Army system you may not come back for years.

I had been staying part of the time in the same house as Mr. Quentin Reynolds, then approaching the zenith of his postscript renown. I thought about Mr. Reynolds as I lay there in bed. No doubt at this moment he would be sitting happily having a quiet drink in some congenial restaurant. Thousands of people were doing that all over the world. Why not me? I didn't like my evenings and week-ends being out of control. Still, there you are, and what can you do about it? I went to sleep. Sleep is no mean standby.

## 7

### BACK WITH THE MAJOR

I DIDN'T GET UP UNTIL TEN PAST EIGHT; THE FIRST PERSON I MET downstairs was the Major who used to be my Company Commander. He told me that from today he was going to be my Company Commander again and that I was to have Number 14 Platoon. After breakfast I went up to the Company office and got one of the corporals to show me the platoon billets. There was no one in them. They were all out on fatigues, so I went back to the Company office and asked if there was anything to do; as there wasn't I went for a walk up round the town and back again

to the mess, where I read the papers. Other people kept drifting in and out, all disgruntled by the moving. One or two were slaying behind for a day or two on the rear party and they were trying to fix up a party to go out to the road-house near Tewkesbury. John asked me to come up to the Foley for a drink.

When I first joined the Battalion I shared a room with him. He was an immaculately-set-up figure in his thirties, whose rich, silky moustache and ramrod bearing often led to his being addressed as 'sir' by people of the same rank as himself. Other things being equal, the cultivation of a military moustache is not usually the hallmark of the mental giant, though of course there is always (Mr.) Osbert Lancaster. But John King was by no means as mentally static as might be feared at first. He was a very good man to be with in discomfort; there was nothing defeatist about him. It was quite a tonic to hear him cursing the arrangements when getting up in the middle of the night. He was very good at looking after himself and injecting some degree of comfort into unpromising surroundings. This was inclined to be infectious. Also he had a wireless. What I could never figure out was how he contrived to be so interested in mortars. Here was a man accustomed to an entertaining and prosperous life in the oil business and, judging by the studio portraits he carried with him, elsewhere. He suddenly finds himself in charge of a platoon of men armed with one of the more rudimentary forms of artillery, and he proceeds to become passionately interested in it. He isn't a boy just left school; he isn't a man who has never known anything more entertaining or varied. Of course, there may be more in mortars than you might think.

We walked up the road, exchanging forebodings about the move, but before we got as far as the drink a man came up with a message that I was to check the Company ammunition. This meant standing watching it loaded on to a truck.

After lunch I supervised Barter, my batman, while he packed my things.

There was a Company Commander's conference at 2 p.m., attended by all the officers and sergeants. Everyone had been issued with a list of all the places they were to pass through on the move and how far they were from each other. Everyone jotted down notes on the Company Commander's instructions.

Reveille was to be at 2 a.m. The billets were to be swept and cleaned again before breakfast. Breakfast would be at 2.30 a.m., parade in company lines at 3.14 a.m. Buses to start moving off at 4.14 a.m.

"Now I want to know exactly how many men you will each have travelling. Mr. Cotterell, how many will you?"

"Thirty-four, sir," I said decisively, for it is better to be wrong and decisive about it than just wrong.

"Have you allowed for rearguard party and baggage guard?"

"Yes, sir," I said untruthfully.

"You will have coach number sixteen and half seventeen. You'll carry an A.A. detachment of two men in your second coach."

"Right, sir."

And so it went on. There would be a ten-minute halt every other hour.

Dress would be full marching order. Gas capes would be worn. Yes, the men could take off their equipment once the journey started, but when they got out at the halts they must wear tin hats and respirators.

"Haversack rations will be drawn at tea-time. Palliasses are to be emptied of their straw in the left-hand front room of No. 4 billet. Blankets will be folded separately and carried in the coaches. Are there any questions?"

"Sir, where will the motor-cyclists' blankets be carried, sir? They can hardly carry them on their bikes, sir."

"In the spare coach—Number 24."

I walked up to the town and bought some books for the journey and a gramophone record. I went to the Priory tea-rooms, where I had been for tea most days since we had been at Malvern. I wondered how long it would be before the faces of the people who ran it would be unrecognizable again; life nowadays was nothing but reshuffle.

I walked back to the mess and back up the town, back to the mess again and back to the town. We had soup, cold meat and tinned pineapple for supper. I went to bed soon after. When they said we were going to the south coast I had visions of Sunday trips to town, but the R.A.S.C. Captain who was staying with us to superintend the move showed us where we were going on the map; it might as well have been Teheran.

## 8

## CURSING EVERY ASPECT

REVEILLE WAS AT 2 A.M. BREAKFAST AT 2.30 A.M.

In due course we arrived on a high ridge with a high wind blowing through the broken windows of the coach. It was 9.20 a.m. on a Sunday morning. We had been on the move five hours and sitting in the coach for six. I managed to doze a bit but was very twisted and cramped. Some had been sleeping all through; they could sleep on a clothes-line. The others had been swearing at each other, cursing every aspect of the journey. It was like all Army journeys, punctuated with unexplained delays and apparently endless. It was cold before daylight, a damp, misty morning. I wrapped myself in blankets like a squaw and the driver lent me a bit of sacking as a substitute window-pane.

Everything went very smoothly. Only one man in the Battalion stuck his rifle through the coach window instead of the usual three or four. Only one or two men arrived just as the coaches were moving off.

"I thought you said you were all present, Mr. Cotterell. Take that man's name and find out where he's been."

"Where the devil have you been?"

"Not my fault, sir. Had to pack Mr. Gregory's things, sir. Couldn't get here before, sir."

"Well, go and sit down."

The men didn't talk much. They were trying to sleep, and some of them were noisily succeeding. I felt dreadfully tired, my eyes aching with fatigue, my whole body only held up by nervous excitement from collapsing in sleep.

It didn't get light until after eight o'clock, and then not very.

All the morning we drove slowly through dully pretty country, never passing a town of more than five thousand people and only three towns at all. Characterless, inexplicable communities they were, each with its temperance hotels and circus advertisements. All over England you see temperance hotels and circus advertisements, but you never see anyone coming in or out of a temperance hotel or see the actual circus.

We passed three staff officers standing on a corner, their cars and orderlies drawn up behind them. The staff officers were watching the move. After that, no doubt, they would have a pleasant breakfast in some well chosen hotel.

I was reading *New Writing*, a story about an eighteen-year-old boy in the last war sent from Russia to the Western front via his native Berlin. And the train stopped a few hundred yards from his home and he saw his mother and young brother out walking. But from fear of discipline he couldn't get out and talk to them.

Then our coach stopped for a minute in the main street of a little town and one of the men leaned out to a woman passing, and said "Hullo, Mrs. Owen."

"Why, hullo, Tommy, where have you come from?"

"Ah, 'tis where am I going you mean. Have you seen Mother about? Tell her you saw me."

The man lived in the town. But it wasn't the same as in *New Writing*. The man didn't cry when the coach moved on, he went on reading *True Romances*.

After daylight the men became less abusive. The man behind me launched out on an account of what he would be doing on Sunday morning at home. Others argued whether or not West Ham were the best little team in London.

About ten o'clock we stopped for about forty minutes on the edge of a market town. No one knew what it was called because no one knew where we were, or cared.

The street we stopped in was no rue de la Paix; aspidistra-ridden Victorian houses and pin-money general shops, but of the kind that stay open on Sundays. We couldn't buy any food, but I got a glass of milk at a dairy and a cottager gave me a cup of coffee, which was, however, horrible. I was then cheered up a great deal by buying the Sunday papers and finding my book advertised in them. We moved on. Nearly everyone began falling asleep. I read the papers. An hour later we had to get out and push the bus up a hill. We didn't stop for dinner but I didn't feel hungry; one gets very inured to these journeys. The nice thing about them is that you aren't called on to do anything. We drove straight on until 3.40 p.m., when we arrived in a lane leading past a farm. We were ordered to debus—men were very sluggish after such a long journey—and marched into the farm.

The men were billeted in barns. We were greeted by some R.E.'s who were there as staff to look after the billets which, for the current ten days of mass moving, were being used by different convoys every night.

"Will there be any food tonight, sir?" the R.A.S.C. driver asked me with the unconcern of one used to the answer being no.

"Everything all right?" I asked the Platoon when they were all lying

about the hay-carpeted barn floor. One man said, "Well, it's a bit rough like, sir," but otherwise the response was not overwhelming.

"One thing I can't stand is blasted farmyards," said the C.S.M. "Always such a blasted mess they are."

Having attended to the discomfort of the men, we went to find our own quarters. There were a couple of rooms in the farmhouse, nothing special but certainly nothing to grumble about. The Major drove off to find an officers' mess cook who had been abducted by another Company. I was sent to get some bread for the mess. Dinner wasn't so bad. Soup, stewed steak, rice, and a savoury and a couple of bottles of beer each. There were three of us, the Major, another subaltern and I. There were two other officers in the Company; one had gone on ahead, the other was left behind. We talked about what Hitler would do next and also what we were going to do next ourselves. The dining-room was large, cold and cluttered with the typical farmhouse miscellany of mail order acquisitions. They had an extraordinary large number of books, including one room devoted to them. "Three tons of books. I've got sons, you see," the farmer told me.

After dinner the Major took us to the farmyard to hear him talk to the six bad men of the Company. The sergeant-major ranged them in a semicircle in front of the Major and then stood with us two subalterns behind him. There was a pigsty close behind us.

"None of you are habitual Army criminals as I used to know them in the old days," he said to them. "Otherwise I wouldn't bother with you. There's nothing really bad in any of you. The things you have done when you've fallen foul of us—well, you know the result. Well, now we are moving. So now is your chance to show what you're really made of."

"If you let the Company down where we're going you will be in real trouble. But you've got your chance and I know you'll take it. This isn't a threat but a warning, and that is why I am giving it to you in front of your platoon commanders, so that we can all see how you get on."

It was still awfully early. When you get up at 2.30 a.m. it makes a nice long day. I went to bed at 8.30 p.m.

## 9

### HE CAN'T GET USED TO THE RICH FOOD

IT'S A FUNNY THING, BUT I CAN'T DESCRIBE ANYTHING CONNECTED WITH Nature. I look at it and nothing comes into my head, whereas if I look at a man my brain immediately registers some combination of words to describe him. We drove through some very beautiful country the following day, and it would help this story if I could describe it with a bit of Henry Williamson intensity, but what's the good of trying? It isn't that I haven't got any feeling for that kind of thing, but I certainly haven't got much, nor had the rest of the platoon. They didn't take the slightest notice of the country they were going through; only the cinemas, whose appearance and current programmes they criticized interestedly; and the people, not only girls but men. We didn't start passing people in any numbers until about nine, when we were going

through the outskirts of Reading. It is surprising how far you can travel through the English countryside without seeing more than one or two people. At one time there was a rumour that we would have to debus and march some twenty miles. "I want to report sick, sir. I've got galloping standstill," said one man.

"He can't get his stomach used to the rich food, sir," said his neighbour.

"Nice bit of stuff coming along here."

"Don't touch her."

Terrific whistles and hoots broke out as we passed the girl. The old argument broke out between Londoners and provincials as to whether or not London girls were better-looking. The man next to me was reading yesterday's *Empire News* which I had given him. There was an article in it called "The Army of Today's All Right".

"Bloke that wrote that works for the Labour Exchange then," said the man behind.

By this time we had been sitting down far too long. We had that dull, obsessive ache at the points where the thigh-bones articulate with the rest of the skeleton; I didn't study anatomy two years for nothing.

At 10.20 we stopped; there was a certain amount of comment about the stopping-place, which was apparently miles from anywhere as usual. John, the other subaltern, and I walked off down the road and found an admirable olde-worlde teashop, where we had a boiled egg, read the papers and bought some sandwiches for lunch. We came back in great humour and walked up to the Major. "We've been doing very well, sir," I said.

He looked bayonets at us.

"Were you given permission to leave this column?" he demanded in an iced voice.

"No, sir."

"Then will you kindly see that this does not happen again. Whatever are you thinking of, leaving the line of march? I've been over half the countryside where your men have been wandering. Will you kindly control them in future? That is your job, not mine." And he strode off down the road.

We began to get near the place about three o'clock; it was very flat country and inclined to marshiness, a typical seaside bungalow landscape punctuated with rock and postcard shops. The bungalows and houses were mostly pretty new and relatively well built. Speculation about what the new billets would be like was pessimistically rife. The Major had said they would be 'fairly good', and he had described last night's billets in the barn as 'good'.

"A —— field I suppose he means."

"I wish it was huts like we had at Lowestoft."

"Work all the —— time at Lowestoft."

"I don't mind work so long as you get comfort."

We passed a bashed-in cowhouse.

"There's a likely place," said the men behind me.

"Luke at the nawtice—'acks for 'ire. It'll do nicely when we get a bit of time off."

"I wish he'd get a move on. Git on, driver, let the —— thing go. Throw the —— wheel away."

The driver, an R.A.S.C. man who had been driving and sleeping in this same bus for three months, did not abandon his technician's aura of aloofness and responsibility. He ignored whatever was said to him or about him. The last three or four miles were alarmingly unpopulated—just marshy fields. We finally pulled up in a road of suburban-looking little houses like you get on the Southend Road. There was the usual wait on arrival. John and I went up and stood around while the Major talked to the Captain he was taking over from, and to our own Company second-in-command, who had come on ahead a week ago.

Each platoon was given a guide and we drove off down the road round the corner along a muddy track between planlessly situated bungalows. We stopped near a row of small houses. Our platoon was allotted three houses and a bungalow—marvellous accommodation, of course. We had a house for each section and the bungalow for platoon headquarters.

The men could practically have a room each. Although a lot of people were still living in the neighbourhood, many of the houses were empty and a high proportion had been left furnished. The billets were extraordinary in that we kept finding things like primus stoves and bicycles, and coal in the cellars, and even flour. The troops we took over from just couldn't be bothered to take it away.

This and the empty houses all around made it seem like occupying abandoned enemy territory. We found a wireless set in my bungalow and all sorts of kettles and crockery, not to mention a motor-boat in the garage.

As darkness fell it started raining. My room was quite pleasant, with french windows, though a deplorable outlook on to a grass patch and the back door of another bungalow. Subalterns were to sleep with their platoons, the Major and the second-in-command at the officers' mess, which was about zoo yards of mud away. After dinner I went back and worked in my room; it had rather a pleasant, open red-brick fireplace. My bed was made up on the floor, but with a mattress so perfectly comfortable.

Now when I was on leave I lived in considerable comfort, I didn't get drunk or commit any particular excesses, I stayed in the country on a farm part of the time. I stayed up later than usual, but not very and not unreasonably so. I had regular meals and good ones. I came back to the unit and stayed up all night, sat in petrol fumes all day, and much of the time in wet clothes, and had meals at all hours. In every way I strained the resources of my body. Yet when I came back from London I looked jaded and rather unhealthy and after these two days of unpleasantness I looked just as well as before I went on leave.

## 10

## DIFFICULT TO KEEP MEN DRY

UP AT 5.45 A.M. FOR THE STAND-TO. THEY FELL IN ALONG THE DARK, pot-holed road outside, dressed as for battle. After inspecting them they went back to their billets and got shaved, though they were not allowed to take off their equipment. I worked in my room.

After breakfast there was a Platoon Commander's conference in the

Company office, which, like all Army offices, was a bleak uncarpeted room with trestle tables and forms for sitting on and filling in.

The Major was a regular soldier of pretty orthodox mould, who, after an almost lifelong connection with the Army, was beginning to develop a vaguely military flavour. He didn't say much, and at first sight seemed rather formidable. There was nothing ragtime about his approach. He liked everything to be in its proper place and was persistent to have it so. On extra-curricular subjects he was a sometimes rather naive inquirer, but on the business of running a Company office he knew how to get what he wanted.

Stephen, the second-in-command, who is now a parachutist, was rather the juvenile lead. In private life a solicitor, he had a considerable flow of conversation. Like the Major, he knew what he wanted, but whereas the Major made no claims to omniscience outside the military field, Stephen was more confident.

Then there was John, who used to sell new 'antique' furniture, and was now engaged in selling his platoon. Sometimes I used to find John rather trying. He was so much more efficient than I was. His returns were never late, his men were never idle, his Platoon billets were always a shining example. His whole approach was much more methodical and wholehearted, and he was always willing to help those of us who were less gifted.

We were a subaltern short at the moment, and while we were waiting for a new one the platoon sergeant was understudying.

Then there was the company sergeant-major, who used to be a policeman, and the company quartermaster-sergeant, who owned a pub.

We sat around, the seven of us, on backless benches while the Major was talking on the 'phone to the Adjutant. Presently he put down the 'phone and started.

"This is a Platoon Commander's show, so there will be considerable decentralization and all sorts of administrative problems," said the Major. "The C.O. is coming round this morning. Show him if posts are mutually supporting with fire plans interlocking. Have posts got overhead cover?"

"Some have, some haven't, sir," said John.

"Ammunition must be kept dry," said the Major. "Do you know how many latrine buckets you have got, Anthony?"

"Six, sir," I said smartly, without having the vaguest idea.

"Don't leave vehicles in the open together. I want your opinion on whether we cook as a Company or by platoons."

We said by platoons.

He went on to make the following points:

1. No inside latrines to be used except by officers and full rank N.C.O.'s.
2. Action Stations to be manned at once.
3. All meter readings to be taken.
4. No mattresses will be used.
5. Rations for tomorrow, collect from Q about 1800, Newark Farm, Shipton Green.
6. Blackout is bad.
7. No man allowed on beach.

"Minefields will be marked. There will be a bicycle for each Platoon Commander. Warn your truck-driver on state of roads. Nothing a truck-driver likes more, in my experience, than bucketing along over potholes to see how high he can bounce. Any man seen doing this must be charged."

The conference went on for about an hour.

We drew our bicycles; they were in terrible condition. I decided to make my first ride my last. I went back to the platoon billets and inspected them properly for the first time. Some of them were in pretty bad state from their previous owners—cigarette ends and old food in the stoves, rubbish in the cupboards, baths that needed scouring. The men were already at work on them. I went round with the lance-corporal in charge of each billet, deciding such problems as where to put the latrine bucket and what room to use as a drying room. It was going to be difficult to keep men dry. I sent six men off to reload our stores from the baggage train which had brought them from Malvern. Then I told the batman where to store my own things. I then asked the corporal to suggest two men to be cook and mess orderly. He suggested two names and I summoned them to my room, which now had a garden chair by the fireside. They were reassuringly clean and intelligent-looking. Both of them had cooked for their families, being married men. No, they didn't think they would be incapacitated by having to cook for a large number. Yes, they would take an interest in the job. We went round to the kitchen. It was an ordinary small house kitchen with a coal-burning stove and an electric one. They hadn't cooked by electricity before but they supposed it would be all right. After some further remarks on the virtue of cleanliness I left them to meet the sergeant-major, who had arrived on a truck with gum boots and leather jerkins for the platoon. We counted them and started issuing them.

"When is dinner coming, sir?" asked my batman.

"I don't know; they've got ten miles to go to 15 Platoon and back. Was breakfast hot all right?"

"Yes, the porridge was nice and hot, sir. Tell you what, though, sir: the fried bread was hard as nails, came off your teeth like bullets."

Having half an hour to spare during the afternoon I decided to delight my men with a short lecture, and wishing to impress them with my adventurous past I chose the subject of Switzerland, the only foreign country I have visited for the purpose of writing about. Given that there had to be a lecture about anything at all my men weren't uninterested in Switzerland, on account of her remarkable capacity for keeping out of wars.

## II

### NOT ONLY GET NO DINNER

I WAS READING THE 'STRAND MAGAZINE' AT BREAKFAST WHEN THE MAJOR came in from an early-morning tour of inspection. "What are your platoon doing this morning, Anthony?" he asked. He had me there.

"I didn't know what plans you had for us, sir."

"Well, in that case you should have asked me. A leg-stretcher, I think; yes, go for a leg-stretcher from ten to half past twelve."

"Yessir. Sir, about this question of cooking, when do we draw the rations?"

"They'll be ready any time from half past nine."

I walked over to the billets and sent sergeant to organize a truck. I went to see the cooks; they were entertaining some friends to a nice cup of tea. "No coal, sir, no food," they said. We waited around for twenty minutes until sergeant came back in a truck with half a ton of coal and said the food was on its way. Then we marched off they knew not where and nor did I. They started singing immediately all the usual songs about I didn't want to join the Army, I don't want to go to war. I'd rather hang around Piccadilly underground; but soon merging, as usual, into word-perfect and heartfelt versions of sophisticated sentimental songs. Some had been to a dance last night; the N.C.O. walking close behind me was a Romeo. "Lovely little dame I found last night; twenty-two she is; smashing she is." They went on to the usual anecdotes about N.C.O.'s, like the occasion a few days ago when half-way through a drill parade the sergeant-major suddenly inexplicably threw his hands to his head and shouted, "All I ask is a hundred yards of road to train a million men. Don't grudge me that."

All this time we were marching through absolutely flat country with nothing in the skyline but clusters of week-end houses. They were mostly empty and rather pathetic when you passed them close by. Many of them were quite attractive and no doubt nearly all of them represented the ultimate achievement in comfort of someone's working life. You felt sorry for the estate agents whose prosperity used to seem so wickedly easy; their offices were sprinkled all over these 'private roads' and 'garden estates', and if they were open the only business they ever did was with the War Office man who dealt with damage done by troops billeted in their properties. These emptied areas are ideal for soldiers, there is so much accommodation. We stopped for a break at a W.V.S. canteen very comfortably fixed up in a small modern house with a properly equipped kitchen. We went on again over a circuit about seven miles long. I don't want to flaunt my great physical strength, but it seems I set rather a pace. It is very much a mental thing this business of endurance; it is far easier to keep on without feeling tired when you are leading than when you are irresponsibly following.

As we marched up the road towards the billet a depressing smell of burning came from the cookhouse. Everyone was delighted. "Not only get no dinner, 'ave to put the — fire out." I dismissed them and made for the cookhouse, but surprisingly all was well—an extra cook had been sent by H.Q. and the meal was ready. Only the rice was underdone because it had arrived late. After dinner they had a lecture on map-reading and I offered fifty Players for the best essay on "What I did on my last leave and what I would like to do on my next." One man who couldn't write was given a job in the cookhouse.

We had an officers' conference about the defence of the place after tea and then went for a drink to a well-equipped but otherwise unpatronized club down the road. We played ping-pong. We had a most

varied conversation at dinner, everything from night-clubs to Moses, newspapers to working conditions in Ford factories. The Major stood up as the champion of the Ten Commandments and a glass of port to your dinner as the basis of a sound life.

## 12

## THE COOKS WERE PUT UPON

THE COOKS COMPLAINED RATHER TEMPERAMENTALLY THAT THE MEN HAD shouted at them because tea was late yesterday. It wasn't their fault, they said, someone had switched off the electric kettle. For breakfast there was some watery porridge, a slice of bacon, one slice of bread and margarine and a mug of tea. No wonder if they laugh a little acidly at the current agitation to reduce soldiers' rations. It may sound splendid to get more meat than the civilian allowance, but you need it if the only other attraction is a slice of bread.

I walked along the front. The beach huts were tumbling to ruin, their doors swinging in the wind and disclosing a chaos of old paraffin lamps and broken furniture. I took an inventory of one. There was a smashed-up table, a couple of deck-chair frames, a sunshade, a banjo case, faded cotton curtains flapping through the broken windows, and on the floor a record of 'Body and Soul'. I sat on the little railing outside. There was a board nailed to it with the name of the hut—'Wy-Wurry'. Sitting on the railing, I couldn't see the sea; the concrete and barbed-wire defence works came in the way. All along the beach in either direction there were soldiers sitting with Bren guns in little emplacements. How now, Sunny South Sam? Further along the coast there was an hotel. I walked into the bar; it was a big bar glittering with bottles and chromium. One of those bars where the people running it aren't quite sure whether they want it to be a pub or a cocktail bar. There was a big open fire blazing, but the milk and *The Times* hadn't been taken in from the step outside. An old woman washing a glass scampered away and fetched out a full-bodied, red-lipped, red-haired woman who looked absolutely in character. Her excitement at getting a customer died down when I said I didn't want a drink. I was just looking around. She started going through an account book. "Yes, it is a bit quietish here during the week, but it livens up week-ends, the evacuees usually have their husbands down. 'Course, it used to be awfully jolly here; in summer get a jolly crowd, you know, and we had a lot of fun. I say, if you don't want a drink would you like a cup of tea?" That made my seventh cup today. Just down the road there were two other bars, the usual drinking club bars on the Kingston By-pass model; but clean and stocked up with drinks, carpet on the floor and red leather chairs round the same red-brick open fireplaces; not a soul in them of course. Nearly all the neighbouring houses were empty. It looked quite mad. I spent most of the morning superintending my platoon working on the defence works on the beach, and the afternoon too. We were told to look out for the C.O. flying over the Battalion area (in a 'plane) but didn't see him.

There was a Battalion dance that night. I decided to look in before

dinner and if it was good go back after. It was in 'W' Company's dining-room, and this turned out rather further away than it sounded. Two men showed me the way; they told how their Company had had to march the last eight miles here starting at midnight after travelling all day. "The usual business, sir, only another few hundred yards all the time."

"It must have been most popular."

"It was nearly a fatal mistake, sir."

The first dance in a new station is naturally full of emotional significance and rarely justified optimism. The men were already standing in groups watching the local girls arrive. It was held in a holiday camp dining-room, quite a large wooden bungalow hall with a radiogram booming. The cook sergeant, that other Astaire, was already tangoing like a mad thing with a little dark girl just like the girl he used to swoop round the Winter Gardens floor at Malvern; he might have brought her here in his kit bag. I went down the road to the club we went to last night. "Ah, you've got it all to yourself this time," said the man behind the bar. It was as empty as the pub was this morning. After dinner, continuing my round of gaiety, I went to another club. There were five people here, three of them engaged in owning or running the place and a gunner officer who had brought his landlady in from next door. They were playing bridge. They were very apologetic about this. I kept saying it was quite all right. I was perfectly happy. I only wanted a quiet drink, but they wouldn't have it. "We don't often play bridge," they said. "We haven't played for ages." They seemed to feel guilty at not being found drinking and dancing.

"Next time you come we'll have a game of darts," said one woman.

"Oh, good," I said, horrified.

### 13

## QUITE A FAMILY MAN

THEY WERE LATE AT STANDING-TO. I ASKED THE LAST MAN TO ARRIVE why he was late.

"I'm sorry I'm late down, sir," he said handsomely.

"We're all sorry," I said. "Very sorry; indeed. What we are interested in is why."

"I lost my voice, sir. I couldn't 'ardly speak."

"Now will you tell us all what bearing that has on your not being dressed in time?"

"Well, if you lose your voice, sir, you can't 'ardly move. I'm very sorry, sir."

Breakfast was half an hour late and not ready then. The electric stove went wrong at 6.50 and wasn't repaired until 7.40 a.m. There were sausages for breakfast, two sausages each, a slice of bread and margarine and porridge. The sausages had to be cooked in bathtubs on the fire and the porridge couldn't be started until the stove was repaired. In future they must half cook the porridge the night before. The men arrived at 7.30 and were told to get cleaned up instead. As so often happens, the man who arrived with the certificate of cookhouse experience was a

passenger, he must be replaced. "How many sausages are there?" asked the sergeant.

"Sixty-two," said the cook.

"Thirty-three men; there ought to be sixty-six."

"Only sixty-four issued, Sergeant."

"How d'you make sixty-two, then?"

"I had two last night."

"You don't have two this morning then."

"Don't want any, Sergeant."

Apparently cooks rarely eat breakfast and very little lunch. The constant smell and sight of food anaesthetizes them against hunger, but they have constant cups of tea and usually an evening meal. I was told last night's dance livened up considerably in the end. The band didn't arrive until nine, as some were on duty and all the instruments were locked in the quartermaster's stores.

The meat for dinner went bad suddenly and thoroughly. We buried it in the garden. It was disappointing, because this dinner was meant to be the best meal yet; actually it still was. Sergeant managed to get some bacon from the quartermaster; there were also carrots, cabbage and potatoes. I wanted the potatoes to be roasted to bridge the rather odd combination of bacon and cabbage, but we hadn't enough oven accommodation to roast more than one per man, making up the rest with mash. There was steamed sultana pudding to follow and together it made a very presentable meal. A touch of style was lent by having tables to eat it off. These were newly issued; a pity the legs weren't the same length.

Pay parade in the afternoon—it was held in the dining-room. The corporal sat by my side selling National Savings Stamps; the thirty-three men bought twelve shillings' worth. The padre came to tea in my room. He volunteered to go abroad, and was waiting to go, but he found this place so amusing he wished he could put it off for a month or two. It gave me quite a proprietorial feeling to see him out of our front door to his car. I had never been a householder before.

One way and another I felt quite a family man, arranging how the meals were to be done and the coal and the bath-water and so on. Perhaps after the war I shall join the Boy Scouts.

. . . . .

A man came up to ask my advice on a somewhat ticklish matter. He had gone home on leave and found that his girl had gone off with another man. I said I was sorry to hear it, but if she was likely to do that kind of thing perhaps it was just as well he had found out so soon. But it wasn't sympathy he was after, it was legal advice. He had bought the girl a ring on the instalment plan, and as she had still got the ring he wanted to transfer responsibility for the rest of the payments to her. I told him I didn't fancy his chances and advised him to write to the girl to get the ring back and hold it for use on some future occasion.

This particular man used to be a window-cleaner, and he thought this had something to do with his romantic troubles. If you tell a girl that you are a window-cleaner she does not soften any. She seemed to

regard it as a frivolous job. She couldn't take him seriously, though he was quite a serious young man.

He didn't find the work very interesting; one window is just like another. But the job had its points. He earned £4 10s. a week and was his own master. Not many of the men he went to school with could say that.

He couldn't say it until four years ago. Until then he worked for a large window-cleaning firm from 6.30 a.m. to 6 p.m. and earned £2 12s. 6d. a week. Then his uncle died and left him £160. With this and £40 savings he bought a half-share in a two-man window-cleaning business. He took a chance, but it turned out all right.

Then he only had to work from 8 a.m. to 3.30 p.m. In an average day he and his partner used to do about fifteen shops and a dozen private houses. The partner still carried on, so all was not lost.

Their equipment consisted of three ladders: one double-twenty (ladder with two sections of twenty rungs, extending to thirty-four feet, weighing 1 cwt., costing £3 16s.); one double-ten (two sections of ten rungs, extending to eighteen feet, weighing 50 lbs., cost £2); one eight-foot point ladder, costing about 12s. 6d. The barrow cost £7 10s.

The trouble with ladders is that you have to carry them around. It is good exercise.

He found working on a ladder no trouble and much safer than he felt when working for the big firm suspended in a swing or clinging on to a narrow ledge fifty feet above the ground.

He worked with a bucket, a leather, and scrim. Scrim is a kind of thin sacking costing 11d. a yard. A yard lasted him about three weeks, a leather about three months.

When there is a good deal of fog and dirt in the air you rub a window first with the leather and then finish off with scrim. But most of the year there is no need for a leather. Scrim takes the dirt off and polishes as well.

Fascinated by all this, I set him to cleaning the windows of my room. It is a pleasure to watch a man suddenly put to the work he used to do in civilian life. Ducks were taking lessons from this man. He polished and shone with his soul.

And no doubt it helped to take his mind off his emotional troubles. He didn't look as if he had any, but then, most people don't show these things, though their incidence is depressingly high.

## 14

### SEE PRETTY WOMEN

WE HAD ANOTHER CONFERENCE AT 9.30 A.M. WITH ONE OF THE LOCAL gunner officers present. There were a lot of changes to be made in the Company defence system. We were each given our areas to reconnoitre. I took the sergeant and the corporal and we walked up and down our platoon front working out where to put what.

The difficulty in making tactical plans is that no one can say whether they are right or wrong, and when inexperienced you feel a certain

diffidence about saying which is the right position for the gun, especially when you realize that on your right decision may rest the lives of your whole platoon, including as it does, mark you, yourself.

After lunch the padre drove me into Chichester, which seemed like New York. It made us realize what an isolated countrified life we were leading. I felt like a countryman coming to London for the first time or as if I had been out East. It was pleasant to see pretty women and the other amenities of civilization. We had tea in a rather unusual marble hall café, very big, with a stone walled balcony all round, very chic waitresses and a radiogram. I had to come right back as I was duty officer. Nothing much happened. I had to pay a man who had got overlooked on pay parade; a man reported back from leave. The Adjutant rang to say there would be a Company Commander's conference on Sunday at 9.30 a.m. There was a message asking if any of our trucks were out between 2130 hours Thursday and 0600 hours Friday, stating routes followed, probably in connection with an A.T.S. girl who was found dead by the road.

I had to inspect the men before they went on guard.

You start at the man's feet and work upwards. His boots must be clean, but dubbined and not shone. Sometimes it is awfully difficult to restrain men from shining their boots. The laces must be crossed properly in the way laid down by the Battalion. His equipment must be properly fitted because otherwise it will be even more uncomfortable if worn for any length of time. Then of course it has to be cleaned and blanced evenly to the locally prescribed shade of green. It would be nice if his shirt wasn't showing at the neck of his battledress. His face must be clean and shaved, his tin hat worn straight and not at an appealing angle. Or if he is wearing a side cap the bottom of the two front buttons must come about an inch over the right eye.

When it comes to considering him from the back you check that his boot heels are clean. See that the safety catch on his rifle is applied and the sights down. Confirm that his bayonet is in the right way round. See that the supporting straps of his equipment are left over right and not right over left, or is it the other way round? He should be standing correctly at attention, in an evenly balanced position without straining. Avoid the tendency to hunch up the left shoulder, and keep the disengaged hand neither too loosely nor too tightly clenched.

Having performed this process they were marched off to go on guard.

You are said to be on guard for two hours at a time, but this is meaningless. Say it was 11.10 a.m. when you last looked at your watch. Forty minutes later you look again. It says 11.14 a.m.

Say, look, a girl coming down the road. Pull yourself together, walk down the opposite end of the beat so you can be walking towards her. She's coming nearer. Is she going to turn off? No, she is coming this way all right. She's in front of you. She's gone by. The show is over.

The first twenty minutes pass in about an hour. It is the other 1 hour 40 minutes that take the time; and the extra fifteen overtime because the relief was late. One way to make the time pass is to count slowly one, two, three, four and so on. When you get to sixty a minute has gone. Only it hasn't.

Your feet wear their way through the heels of your boots. The

framework inside your tin hat crushes against your skull. The tapes which go over your shoulders under your arms to secure your gas cape feel as if they are dragging your arms from their sockets. You ache all over. Nothing you can do in the way of adjustment does any lasting good. The only relief comes from half knees bending.

You sometimes hear a passer-by saying, "I can't think how they keep their faces straight for hours on end." Actually the reason sentries don't laugh is that they haven't got anything to laugh about; and they aren't allowed to.

After two hours they march you back for four hours' rest, and for any food which may be available. You thankfully loosen your kit, bed down on the floor, pull the blankets over your head, and just as you are drifting off to sleep they wake you up and march you off again for another two hours.

Being on guard epitomizes Army life better than most things.

The Major and Stephen came in from duck-shooting, unfortunately without having shot any ducks.

## 15

### TAKE THE BLAME

THERE WAS A SLIGHT DISCUSSION AT THE BREAKFAST TABLE AMONG THE more junior officers on how to take rockets. 'Rocket' is officer slang for a formal reproof. Personally I believe in the straightforward confession of full responsibility. Say it was all your fault even if it wasn't. Try not to point to extenuating circumstances. On no account try to pass the buck to someone else. This is not only despicable but usually unpractical; you can't help being favourably impressed with a man who takes full responsibility, and if after taking it, and not using the obvious excuses, he then draws your attention casually to the circumstances which explain, albeit do not excuse, his conduct, then the probability is that you feel more lenient towards him than to a man who stands there whining excuses. At least, that is my experience, not only in giving punishment but in getting it. If I get in trouble, and I often do, it is usually through forgetting to do things. For instance, on one occasion I went on week-end leave. I asked my Company Commander's permission and put my name down in the officers' leave book. That was on the Wednesday, and I went off on the Friday without looking in the leave book to make sure that the Colonel had initialled his permission. They wanted me over the week-end. I was wired for and didn't get the wire, so when I got back Sunday night the news was not good. I went round to the orderly room on the Monday morning. The C.O. was away, so I was arraigned before the second-in-command and the Adjutant.

It is remarkable how effective this kind of telling off is. For, looking at the thing from a completely unscrupulous point of view, you know before they start that there is nothing much they can do to you. They aren't going to cashier you for an offence of this kind. They might make you duty officer for fourteen days running. This would be inconvenient but by no means insufferable. But in point of fact I felt just as anxious

as I did on similar occasions at school when there was the immediate probability of being bent over a chair. Officers' discipline in the small offences is based on making a man feel that he has played a pretty poor trick and let down people who trusted him, with the background point that he is making things worse for his brother officers. Then there is the embarrassment of living in the same house with a man who has just told you these things. Altogether it is a very effective system.

It was a marvellously sunny Sunday morning. I was sitting in the mess listening to the German radio band, waiting to go round my platoon posts with the second-in-command, who hadn't come back from fixing up a football field. The men were mostly punting a ball about on the waste ground at the back of the billets. They all wore scarves, leather jerkins and wellington boots. News in German had just come on; the mess waiter who was cleaning the room hurried to adjust the radio; he twiddled in a quite anxious quest for jazz. Unhesitatingly he jumped the needle away from a symphony concert, a piano recital, a voice talking Spanish and a cinema orchestra giving 'In a Monastery Garden'.

Swedes were one of the dinner vegetables. Hardly anyone would touch them, though they always seem a very acceptable vegetable to me. The kitchen was being kept very clean. There were two slices of bread per man at breakfast and ten weren't used. The obvious solution was to cut the bread, giving each man what he wanted, but in practice to avoid a service bottleneck it was necessary to cut it beforehand. In future they must cut fifty slices in advance and the rest as required.

At lunch we were talking about how to preach a sermon so that it is remembered. I said the Church ought to go in more for solving human problems—how to get on with your mother-in-law, that kind of thing. The Major is a great admirer of W. H. Elliott; he used to make a point of staying in to hear his mid-week service, and one day three years ago on his way home from the Cavalry Club, where he seems to have spent an awful lot of his time, he dropped in at W. H. Elliott's church. He could remember a lot of the sermon word for word, which is no bad tribute to Reverend Elliott's personality.

There was a company football match against the R.A. after lunch.

. . . . .

We started an allotment. The ground was so completely mud that it didn't seem to me likely that anything would grow; but one of the men who used to have an allotment was very keen. He ruled out a plot behind the billets and started digging. Seeds were provided by some obscure official process.

I wasn't able to give him any very convincing technical lead, but managed to impress him considerably by airing my acquaintance with Mr. C. (for Cecil) H. Middleton, whom I was once sent to see. Though he must have been extremely prosperous he was living in a Surbiton street of small houses with a small, narrow garden some ninety paces long surrounded on four sides by other little houses and gardens. It was a very ordinary garden indeed, looking no better than all the other little gardens all round it. If I had had any interest in gardening it would have been most encouraging.

"You know, I haven't looked in the tool-shed for months," said Mr.

Middleton, and staged a come-back by clipping twigs off a pear tree. We had tea, made by Mr. Middleton in person, in the little front room he used as his study, and afterwards he played 'Little Old Lady' on a one-string fiddle he made from a cigar-box when he was eighteen.

Thus vicarious contact with the horticultural high priest had a remarkable effect on our gardener's enthusiasm. For the rest of the afternoon he dug like anything. This particular man used to be a postman. He lived in a 17s 6d.-a-week three-room flat in Camden Town with his wife and three young children. He was paid just over three pounds a week, which he handed over to his wife, except fourpence a day for ten cigarettes. He told me a good many postmen did the same. They are a steady-living lot. The plodding regularity of their job, their fixed and modest wage scales, and the general regulation atmosphere of their work all tend to make them so. (There were 362 official rules to govern their working life.)

But, like everything else, it wasn't so easy as it looks, he told me, as he dug. He had to get up at 4 a.m. He slept with the alarm clock under his pillow so as not to disturb his family, made himself a cup of tea and cycled three miles to the West Central District Office just off New Oxford Street. (Some men had as much as an hour's ride.)

At 5 a.m., one of 300 postmen, he sat down and started local sorting, i.e. dividing the letters into 'walks'. In that office there were forty walks and eight men to each walk.

Each man was supposed to sort forty letters a minute. It took three hours, interrupted only by ten minutes for a penny cup of tea at the canteen. At 8 a.m. they started delivering.

Ways of delivering vary a bit. One day he might go out on a van down to Bush House, with eighty bags of letters and three other postmen. It would take half an hour to unload the bags at Bush House and seven other big buildings in Aldwych.

They then walked back to the office. They were allowed twelve minutes for the walk.

Usually he did a residential-cum-business walk.

He took his bag (it must not weigh more than 35 lbs.), caught a bus (the Post Office paid 1d. fare) to the furthest point of his walk. Then he started walking (regulation speed is three miles per hour.)

He carried a note-book containing his private directory of names of firms, names of people in those firms. Sometimes he was asked by someone to hold back any letters addressed to, say, Miss Brown, and give them to the girl on the lift as he went in, and not to the commissionaire. Some firms do not like their employees receiving private letters.

All sorts of little things hindered his work. He might find among his letters two firms of the same name; only, one was 'Limited' and one wasn't. Some firms with sub-companies do not put all the names on the door. Letters come addressed to individuals in big buildings without the name of their firm.

Names of houses are often duplicated. Houses are named instead of numbered. Houses are split up into several flats.

Letters are regularly sent wrongly addressed, so the postman has to remember the wrong address in order to get it to the right one.

All this can lead to a lot of fun. For he was held fully responsible for the

safe delivery of his letters. And he was working all the time to a strict timetable.

He was supposed to be back by breakfast-time, which was 8.45-9.15. Some cooked their own breakfast in a kitchen supplied and equipped by the post-office; others bought it at the canteen. You could get a good breakfast for 8d.

After breakfast they went back and prepared for the next delivery. This mid-morning delivery was not so heavy. The postmen were back again at 12.30; then, after an hour's general sorting, they were through for the day.

## 16

## THE GENERAL STAYED AWAY

LIVER FOR BREAKFAST; IT NEVER SEEMS NATURAL. THE DIVISIONAL Commander was inspecting the defences, but didn't come near us. By way of a preparatory work-out in case he did I sounded the gas alarm, which consisted in running up and down the road beating an old petrol tin. It was reassuringly successful; everyone recognized it and put their respirators on. They were having a lecture on field engineering; they were going to have plenty of field engineering these coming weeks. Then they had a lecture on security.

At this point the corporal came running to tell me that two men from the electricity company were taking away the electric stove. When I got there it was already in the van. I said, "Here, what about the dinner?" in tones calculated to mingle reasonableness with authority. They said they couldn't help it, they had their orders. I told them to drive round to the Company office, but when we got there the Major was out. The C.S.M. let go at them. "You got your orders? Blast your orders! How dare you come trespassing on military property? Breaking and entering, that's what it is."

"They shouldn't have let us in then," said the vanman.

The sergeant-major could hardly contain himself; he wasn't used to being contradicted. The loss of the stove made dinner an hour late. The Adjutant came to lunch; we had a couple of ducks shot by the Major, rather tough and overcooked. I spent the afternoon on the beach discussing new wiring and weapon position arrangements. It was a lovely afternoon and the tide was out. This business of fixing on how to defend a place can be an interminable business. One difficulty is that you have to be very diffident about knocking down private property in order to get a clear field of view. Stephen and John had a dreadfully long conversation. "Personally, I think the worst thing we have to fear is attack by parachutists from the rear."

"I'd like to get the Vickers on that roof."

"You must curb this itch of yours to get off the ground. It's the sure route to being blown to pieces."

"If we have it there we shall be swamped by the tides; remember, the spring tides are coming."

And so on until tea-time.

In the evening there was a social for the troops at the W.V.S. canteen. There was dancing to a piano played by one of our men, refreshments and card tricks by a gunner sergeant. I talked to Mrs. Bloxham, the extremely nice woman who did most of the organizing. Her husband is an advertising man, now in the Ministry of Information. She told me how some of the local W.V.S. workers had been somehow rather shocked to find that she had invited the local girls, though the results were unexceptionally decorous.

"Are we wanted here then?" some of the helpers had acidly asked. "They can't seem to get the human touch," Mrs. Bloxham said. "They get to look on it as a money-making thing; not for themselves, mind you, but they try to run it as a machine instead of a home."

"I love looking after these boys, don't you? Yours are a very lively lot; the last lot were like turnips. You know I sometimes think the girls they marry and go after don't realize how decent they are. They're so pleased to get a nice letter and so miserable when it's not. You see them when the mail comes in, they're so excited, and if it's a good letter they're different beings, and if it isn't their faces go down."

## 17

## BUT THEY WEREN'T THERE

I WAS WOKEN AT 6.30 A.M., AND MEANT TO GET UP BUT I FELT TOO sluggishly comfortable. I lay there rationalizing how it wouldn't be any loss of time if I didn't get up, that it would be all the simpler and more logical to make up for it later. I had a second cup of tea and listened to Crosby and the bath running in. I had ordered the bath to give me a pleasant purpose in getting up, and I must say it gave a feeling of civilization.

Leave was starting again, having been stopped while we were moving. One man from the platoon was allowed 48 hours' week-end leave when approved by me. Applications had to be submitted to the Company office by lunch-time Wednesday. There were four applications on my table after breakfast. Three in the conventional terms.

To O.C. Y Coy.

From Pte. Smith, A.

Sir,

*I wish to submit this my application for week-end leave. Hoping this meets with your approval.*

*I have the honour to be, Sir,*

*Your obedient servant,*

*A. Smith, Pte.*

The other one from the corporal went on to say: "My reason for requesting this leave is that having been in the service for sixteen months I have only had two periods of seven days (the second three months ago) and have not had a week-end leave since March 1940."

In granting leave you usually have to choose between several cases like this—men whose brothers are being drafted abroad, men who want to get engaged, men who want to fight the man who took their girl.

At 9 a.m. sharp I arrived on the beach at the place where the platoon were to be working. I was keyed to walk round giving out encouragement here and a useful tip there, and many a kindly good morning. I also intended to show my right spirit by joining in one of the simpler tasks myself. Here, I think I'll have a go, I was going to say, like royalty planting a tree.

The only thing was that I found an empty beach. With a rising sense of indignation I walked up to the other end of the position. I was still alone. My mental rehearsal switched to another mood. What the devil do you mean by this, Sergeant? This isn't good enough, you know, I was saying. When I got back, of course the explanation, as usual, was that the tools hadn't arrived. Sergeant had gone down to the Company office to see about the barbed wire, and the 250 sandbags we had trustingly stored in No. 13 Platoon's billet had been used by them mostly as door-mats. I sent them off to see what they could do with their bare hands. I decided to institute a new system of time off for good work. Every man had half an hour break during the morning. It would be taken staggered, two men at a time, to eliminate the time lost in starting after a mass break. You lose continuity; work is much better done in a smooth flow than in jerks. The new system would be to award an extra twenty minutes to any man who worked specially hard.

At lunch the Major demanded an investigation into officers' rations; were we getting more than the men? If so, it must stop at once.

There was another conference after lunch: our defence plan and orders were read out. We were asked what our fire-fighting arrangements were. I hadn't one. We had to fix up targets on the beach to fire at some time next week. The C.O. had noticed many local girls wearing our regimental cap badges. "He doesn't object to this and, personally, I'm all for it," said the Company Commander, "but in future new ones will cost 9d. Impress on the men that there won't be any replacements except by payment."

## HE'S A SCREAM, HONESTLY

CORPORAL TO THE MESS ORDERLY: "YOU'RE LOOKING CLEANER THIS morning—cleaner than yesterday."

Mess orderly: "Thank you kindly, Corporal; very civil."

One of the better lance-corporals was drafted off as a permanent guard at Divisional Headquarters. Just as he was getting very good at running the kitchen. The amazing thing about him was that he liked to be up at 5 a.m.

I had a slight passage of words with the sergeant on the subject of whether leave should be a reward for work well done or an automatic amenity. This arose because I had told one of the corporals that how long before he had leave depended to some extent on whether we got our new

positions well under construction quickly. There is, of course, a lot to be said for the security of automatic amenities and emoluments unaffected by the results of one's work. But I have always been used to a business where if you didn't get on you were got out, and pretty quick. It may be unfair and uncomfortable (for those who aren't very competent) but it gets things done.

I spent the morning reconnoitring the beach up to the next position. Stephen was there interviewing the cooks, who were complaining of short rations. They said the daily ration of porridge was only enough to provide a small portion every other day. They thought other platoons were drawing more at their expense.

"I'll see that this platoon gets its exact ration from now on if there has been any unfairness, but that's all I can do. I can't tell the Government to alter the ration."

"Supposing the men complain then, sir—send them to you, sir?"

"Send them to go to hell."

We walked along to examine the two houses I had my eye on for billets for the platoon. After spending some time on billeting Stephen was developing a house-agent-cum-quartermaster-sergeant or only-a-stone's-throw-from-the-sea technique. "Now that's a fine billet for eight men," he would say, pointing lyrically at some disused rat-run. I saw two rabbits running along the beach. I never thought rabbits were at all maritime.

It is really extremely difficult to tell when men are working reasonably well at these miscellaneous labouring jobs when one is not experienced enough to know how much to expect of them. It is so difficult to tell whether a man is having five minutes' rest after twenty minutes work or twenty minutes rest before five minutes' work.

I was duty officer. The sergeant-major sat in the Company office with me. "The days I don't mind, it's the nights I can't stand. I'd get drunk but me wife's got all me money."

I hired a typist to type out the book on comfort in the Army which I was just finishing. She was evacuated with her parents to a bungalow—nay, villa—just across the road from our billets.

Durrant's sent me the cutting of a review of my last book by L. A. G. Strong in the *Spectator*. It was bracketed with Alec Dixon's book *Tinned Soldier*, and Mr. Strong said: "Mr. Dixon is a proved writer, and Mr. Cotterell has a few years' experience as a journalist on our liveliest daily paper." Discounting as much as possible the hurt personal pride element, that is the kind of statement that makes me good and mad. It seems to me an echo of the attitude that attaches more importance to a statement in a book than the same statement in a newspaper; and more importance if a statement is in the *cliché* and stock market report style of the unpopular Press than if it is written so that anyone can understand it. If the meaning is obscured by muddled expression it is good writing. If you can understand it at a glance it is superficial.

The sergeant-major said: "I've just finished my fifteenth letter since I've been here. The last marriage telegram, answering telegrams we got when we got married. I hate writing, but I better, I guess, otherwise she'll be suspecting something even though I am pure." He was a wag, our sergeant-major; used to be a policeman. He was telling

me about burglars, with especial reference to one of our young men who had asked for compassionate leave on the grounds that his house had been burgled. But on investigating the matter it turned out that, far from having had his house burgled, he was more likely to use his leave to burgle someone else's. It might even be in the public interest to describe our sergeant-major's reconstruction of a typical burglary.

When, after hearing the noise in the night, you venture downstairs you probably find the parlour in disorder, anything portable of value gone, including the burglar. They can ransack a house in a few minutes. You probably run into the empty street and about ten minutes later 'phone the local police-station. When they arrive you tell them that if you had been able to lay your hands on the burglar it would have been the worse for him.

A few huddle under the sheets. A few get up stealthily, take a poker and sneak out on to the landing. If you are as brave as that you will probably see a little man bolting downstairs. Chase after him as hard as you can go, shouting as fiercely as you can. Fierce shouting goes a long way in scaring a burglar. You probably won't catch him. Burglars are nearly always very slippery and wiry, performing the most incredible acrobatics to get away. If you do get your hands on him he may possibly show signs of fight, but only with the idea of escaping.

If he gets really aggressive clock him one with the poker. A blow on the shoulder or the knee is quite enough to put the average man out of action. But the safest way is a downward and sideways sweep aimed at shoulder level. The straightforward downward motion is risky because the man can duck downwards and sideways, kick you in the stomach and get away. But nine times out of ten once you get hold of him he is unlikely to be violent. Sentences for burglary with violence are much higher than for mere burglary—and you can get anything up to life for that.

He is more likely to start in on a hard-luck story, probably all lies. The more plausible he is, the more he probably knows about gaol.

Appearances are nothing to go by. The typical burglar is an unobtrusive, neatly dressed little man like a clerk. Please don't be disappointed if he isn't wearing a choker. He is more likely to wear a nice blue serge suit, rather shabby: there is not much money in burglary. There is usually something sly about him. Mostly burglars are too lazy to try for regular work, but their appearance would be all against them if they did. He will probably strike you as below average in intelligence, though the grander your house the more presentable he is likely to be.

When the police arrive you will probably be quite charmed by the cordial atmosphere between the two sides of the law. Once captured, the average burglar is philosophical; he knows what is coming. After they have gone take a look at the time. It's probably not later than 11.15 p.m.

Nowadays there is more danger of theft in daytime. Burglary is then called housebreaking. It is easier then. The men are out of the house, women are likely to be. If there is no reply to his ring at the bell he makes sure the house is empty by going round to the back, breaks a pane in the glass of the front door, puts a hand through the hole, turns the door-handle and walks inside. Then he bolts the front and back doors on the

inside and walks upstairs to the front bedroom; that is where the good stuff is likely to be.

He is after money, gold and jewellery. But for anything except money he doesn't get more than about a third of its value. The burglar who makes more than five or six pounds a week is clever.

## 19

## I DIDN'T MEAN IT THAT WAY, SIR

WOKE UP TO FIND A WIND AND RAINSTORM HAD SPRUNG UP OVERNIGHT. Work had to be suspended for the morning; anyway, only one-third were available as the others were resting after being on guard all night relieving the other two platoons. The cook had a cyst developing in his eye. I sent him to the doctor; he didn't get back until 11.30 a.m., when we suddenly realized that the dinner hadn't been started, as the Company office hadn't sent the relief cook as arranged. Dinners, therefore, delayed until 1.45 p.m.

I walked along the front with sergeant; the sea was lashing in white horses as far as you could see, which wasn't far. The coast was being eaten up at about a foot a week and the spring tides would be starting soon. The Bren gun post we had been building looked like being pulled in, but if you put it far enough inland to allow for a few months' erosion you lost your field of vision. The sea-wall just in front of us caved in a few months ago except for a big right angle of high concrete wall. It blocked one of our lines of fire and we had been trying to undermine this by digging; we made one small hole and the sea was doing the rest frighteningly fast. When you considered how long it took a gang of men to dig the same effect, the power of the water was depressing.

This girl I had typing for me was a great little knitter. I kept on going over to her bungalow to ask how she was getting on. "How many thousand words have you done today?" I said.

"Well, I don't know. I didn't really count."

"Think now, dear," her mother said.

"I should think about four."

"Do you think you could do more than that tomorrow?"

"Well, I could have done more, but, you see, I had some knitting to do."

"When you finish with me you ought to start a commercial college," I said, but I don't think she noticed anything.

It was my big afternoon this afternoon; the Major and Stephen had gone off to a conference with the Home Guard. "I leave you in command then," said the Major. "Look after this new officer when he arrives."

We were expecting a new subaltern. I left word at the mess for them to send over for me when he came, but when he did I was just drying off after getting soaked through all afternoon, so I didn't go over. I felt guilty, though; fundamentally I have a lovely nature.

When I finally met him at dinner he seemed very pleasant; full, of course, of the new subaltern's anxiety to please. You know how, when



FLYING FORTRESS TAIL-GUNNER, BALL TURRET-  
GUNNER



THE PAN "I PUSHED OFF AND WAS SURPRISED TO FIND THAT I WAS INDEED  
HOLDING ON TO THE SEAMS OF MY JUMPING JACKET, AS INSTRUCTED"

you are nervous, you feel clumsy. I had always thought this was largely imagination, but I watched this new man carefully and it isn't. His hands were a bit tense with excitement, so he did act clumsily with his food and so on. Stephen and the Major had been discussing arrangements for a Home Guard exercise which they had to referee, and how to fit it in with the platoon firing practice.

"When you are used to having everything worked out for you I suppose it must seem rather a headache to have to start fitting things in for yourself," said the Major to Cross, the new officer.

"Rather a headache and rather a bore I should think, sir."

This was not well received.

"I must say I never find it that," said the Major. "If one did one might as well throw one's hand in."

"Oh, I didn't mean it that way, sir!" said Mr. Cross hastily.

I went along to the 'W' Company dance, held in the same holiday camp as last week but much more successfully. As I was wearing gum boots I didn't dance; not that I ever do very much. I met for the first time one of the sergeants who used to be a sub-editor on the *Daily Mirror*. We wondered how Hugh Cudlipp, the *Sunday Pictorial* editor, was getting on in the Army; we discussed the capabilities of Stuart Campbell, his successor. We said what a funny coincidence it was that Peter Wilson had been on this stretch of coast with the unit we took over from, and how strange that he, the sergeant, had never met Conrad Phillips, man of letters and about town.

## BUT HAVE THEY CHANGED THEIR UNDERCLOTHES?

THE NEW SUBALTERN WAS DOWN EARLY TO BREAKFAST.

"I know just how you'll be feeling these next few days," I said. "You'll feel you ought to be doing something all the time. Well, don't worry, you aren't. There won't be anything for you to do these next few days, they'll just leave you alone. It may sound screwy, but that's what'll happen. You want to walk around a bit and get some good book to read."

After breakfast I took him for a walk round. I spent most of the morning walking up and down our platoon front with the Major, having a further discussion on the huts we were building. All people living in houses a certain radius from our posts were to be ordered to leave. I felt rather conscience-stricken when they wished me good morning, as I was more or less responsible for deciding who was to go and who wasn't—subject to about fourteen other authorities, of course.

I watched the Yorkshire pudding cooking; there were air bubbles popping up through it. "It's all the eggs in it, sir," said the cook sarcastically—no, ironically. The dining-room now had tablecloths; one of the men found some old curtains, washed them and sewed them together.

After lunch I had to collect pay for the platoon from the Company office. This took half an hour, because they had forgotten to get the

National Savings Stamps, which are sold on pay parade, and someone had to go to the post-office and get them. There is always something faintly ridiculous about the hitching on of revolvers and the salutes which precede and follow these essentially civil expeditions. I was also given three scraps of paper.

1. To: Coy. Commander  
From: No. 14 Pltn. Com.  
Sir,
- No. 14 Pltn.  
1/3/41.

*This is to certify that all men in my platoon have had a bath and changed their underclothes for week ending 1/3/41.*

.....2/Lt.

2. Sir,  
*All arms and ammunition of my platoon have been checked and found to be correct with exception of the following:*

.....Sgt.

and 3. *What is religion of Cpl. Marchant?*

The coal supply had run out and no more could be had until they found out who was responsible for its supply. All the local civil and military authorities had been approached and all said it was nothing to do with them. The one household problem I didn't have was what shall we have for dinner today; the answer to that arrives in a truck the night before.

Sergeant brought me a letter one of the men had had, the usual pathetic mixture of tragedy and absurdity, ghastly news in the pleased-to-meet-you idiom.

*Dear George,*

*glad to hear that you are better, also we were surprised that you have moved again, Vi, Florrie and myself sent you a tin of chocolate biscuits to the old address, I do hope that they are sent on to you. Let us know wont you.*

*I daresay you were wondering why you havent had word from us sooner. We are later this week but there has been a lot of unpleasant things happening, first Dad is laid up again with congestion of the lungs. He is in bed and he looks pretty queer but the doctor has been to see him. He didnt have much to say, and Mum is looking after him alright so perhaps he will get on alright, let's hope so anyway. Poor old Mum has enough to worry her doesn't she, just as Grace gets better Dad is taken ill, it will be a good job when the better weather comes.*

*We all had a shock on Saturday, we heard that Uncle Charlie had Died on Wednesday. Dad didnt know that he was ill. They hadnt troubled to let him know because he wasnt seriously ill, you know just queer with a cold but it turned to Bronchial Pneumonia and he died suddenly. I suppose that has made Dad feel worse as well because he was in bed when Uncle Charlie's Grandson came round to tell us. Vi and I went round to see Aunt Flo and as Dad is unable to go to the funeral she wants us to go instead.*

*It does seem a shame doesnt it to be taken off so quick. The last time we saw him was when you were home on leave in August, remember when he*

*sat and asked you about the Army. It's hard to realize that he is dead, the funeral is taking place on Thursday.*

*Well George I'm afraid this letter isn't a pleasant one to receive but perhaps there will be better news next time. We are sending you polishes and soap at the weekend, so don't worry about getting any. . . . Cheerio George, hope you like the new place, also if you require anything let us know. Mum and Dad send their love so once again Cheerio with love from us all.*

## ONE OF OUR SOLDIERS WAS MISSING

I SPENT FROM 9 TO 10.15 TRYING TO GET THE PETTY CASH IN ORDER. WHEN I handed over to the Major I was 24s. down. I only had 4s. to give him and I should have had 28s., representing 1s. stopped from each man's pay for barrack damages, sports fund, etc., this being a weekly affair. On investigation it turned out that I had had an extra man to pay, so that accounted for 14s., except that I had given him only 13s., having stopped 1s. from his pay like the rest. This left 10s. unaccounted for; it finally turned out that I had paid one man 17s. instead of 7s., the mistake arising because sergeant mistook the flourish on the 7 for an extra figure 1. I went down to the beach to get the 10s. back and of course he hadn't got 10s. left, only 8s. 8d. I took 7s. 6d. and kicked in 2s. 6d., which I borrowed from the sergeant-major.

At lunch the Major told us about a senior officer at a cavalry depot where he used to be stationed. This officer had a wooden leg and when necessary he used to unscrew it and belabour drunken subalterns with it.

A man came back after twenty-eight days' detention for going absent. I had him in my room to welcome him back and to suggest that it might be more mutually convenient if he stayed with us in future. Quite a presentable individual; some sort of semi-technician in private life; above the average in intelligence, but inclined to obstinacy. The sort of man who is always coming up against people, and complaining of being undervalued and misunderstood. He was full of resolves to lead a better life.

I asked him why he had done it, and got the usual answer about the wife carrying on with someone else. One of the neighbours had kindly told him the day before he was due back from leave. The wife denied that there was anything wrong and of course he half wanted to believe her, and half couldn't. So he hung about a bit after she thought he had gone back, watching the house from his public-spirited neighbour's window. Rather disappointingly, no one turned up. The wife behaved irreproachably. Then, of course, he was irresistibly drawn into going back and starting the disastrous process known as 'having it out'. They had it out for about thirty-six hours, and then the wife said that no good could come of his staying away and she was going to the police. Of course this seemed a completely heartless betrayal, so he made off, and lived a tortured, horrible existence until he was picked up in Central London by the military police.

He found himself at the Central London Recruiting Depot, whose inviting posters fell on rather stony ground. He was marched across the recruit's waiting-room down some stairs to the guard-room, where his name, number, the details of the charge, and a complete record of everything in his possession were written down.

His kit was stored, his attaché-case was sealed with his name on the label. The contents of his pockets were locked in a pigeon-holed cupboard. He was allowed to keep a comb and his handkerchief. On the mantelpiece there was a cigar-box into which the C.M.P. dropped a halfpenny for every swear word. He was marched across the passage from the guard-room through an outer door into a small cell block.

The standing orders were read out to him; for instance: "Should you require to attend the toilet, press the bell once only. You will not hear any answering ring."

"Upon returning to your cell stand properly at ease facing the door."

That is one of the more depressing features of prison life; whenever you come to a door—and the place is full of them—you have to wait for it to be unlocked; and its clang behind you is morbidly final.

He was shown into a cell for two men with two massively planked wooden beds. As he went in his name was chalked up on the slate outside the cell.

The routine next day was as follows:

At 6 a.m. the corporal put on the cell lights. They had to fold their three blankets, dress and be taken to the toilet four at a time. On the way they stacked all their blankets. Soap, towels and razors were provided. The old or determined offenders had to wash two at a time, the dangerous men singly.

A bucket of hot, disinfected water, a piece of soap, a scrubber and a flannel were then issued to each cell for scrubbing it out.

About 7.30 a.m. a bell rang and two men were sent to collect breakfast, which consisted of two sausages, two slices of bread and margarine, one mug of tea. After breakfast the blankets were shaken and folded, the cupboard where they were stored had to be thoroughly scrubbed and disinfected and all outside passages scrubbed.

At 10.30 a.m. they were marched about the exercise ground for half an hour. At 11 a.m. they were paraded for an officer to ask them "Any complaints?"

At noon everything had to be perfect for the sergeant's inspection.

For dinner they had minced beef pie, potatoes, cabbage, pudding, and custard. Tea was a rissole, two and a half pieces of bread-and-margarine cut in incongruously dainty triangular slices. Supper, a bread-and-cheese sandwich and half a mug of tea.

Feet were then washed. Lights out and cell doors double-locked about 9.30 p.m. At midnight the sergeant came round, woke each man and asked his name, and every two hours through the night the cell light was switched on and someone looked through the spy-hole.

A man is only kept here until an escort arrives from his unit. When the release order came through he was marched back to the guard-room, where his kit was lying on the table. The N.C.O. said:

"Check all over your kit, make sure everything's there. When you're satisfied, come round and sign."

The corporal then called for the N.C.O. in charge of the escort. "Come round and sign for him, Corporal."

He was then told, "Pick up all your kit, take it out in the passage, dress yourself outside," and then brought back to his unit to await trial.

Afterwards there was a conference on (a) location of platoon salvage dumps; (b) the question of manning the post under certain circumstances; (c) the Divisional Commander's ideas on equipment and organization of posts; (d) the care we must take not to fire on fighters pursuing enemy aircraft.

At dinner the Major was extremely irritating about newspaper ethics and methods in writing about Army matters. I often feel very critical myself, but I resent criticism from outsiders.

For instance, when my friend Bob Ellison joined the *Daily Express* his one concern was to become dramatic critic. He was most passionately interested in the theatre, and one afternoon the acting News Editor came up to him and said:

"Ellison, you're interested in the theatre, aren't you?"

"Why, yes," said the young Ellison, jumping up to seize his chance, great vistas of fulfilment opening out before him.

"Right. There's a wild cat loose at the Garrick. Get down there."

Of course that is the kind of sample of newspaper values and standards which can be supplied in ample numbers. Their values and standards often couldn't be more cockeyed. But, then, what about everyone else's values and standards? The remarkable thing about newspapers is how balanced and accurate they are, I told the Major. There may be unscrupulous, irresponsible newspapers, but there are also unscrupulous politicians and irresponsible dukes. It really makes me extremely irritated, this anti-newspaper nonsense. Damme, I will write it all down.

So long as some particular section of activity is being singled out for mention, the others will feel slighted if some kind of attention is not drawn to them as well.

The tank men felt they deserved as much attention as the fighter pilot.

The Commandos felt the same. Something was done about it. They were well publicized. It was easy because they had an immediate appeal to the imagination. Then, of course, they became over-publicized. The M.T.C. driver volunteering to drive outside London was labelled M.T.C. Commando by some foolish reporter. The Pioneer Corps man taking a ten-day weapon training course was described as undergoing Commando-type training.

Now, of course, it is no use telling the public or the Pioneer Corps that they are training like Commandos. It only makes them feel ridiculous, or should do. The proper way to raise the Pioneer Corps in everyone's esteem, including their own, is to describe some of the interesting and valuable jobs they have done. Describe their particular job; don't try to identify them with other people. It is perfectly possible to do this in a way which appeals to the newspapers, who are mostly anxious enough to get good intelligent material. They would rather be right, other things being equal.

But, of course, the standards of journalism vary. There are many

whose ideas of accuracy and responsibility are as thoughtless as can be. The same applies to the people whose business it is to provide them with information.

There is a further point. The whole essence of a journalist is that he sees things quickly, and it is difficult under these conditions to see things whole. A journalist's success largely hinges round his capacity to seize on to an idea quickly and wholeheartedly. Usually he does this quite sincerely. There isn't nearly so much writing to order, tongue in cheek, as many people imagine.

When a man with this capacity for quick conviction is introduced to a subject by (1) a man whose job it is to propagate the subject, or (2) a specialist whose idea of the significance of his pet theme is often even more cockeyed than a reasonably intelligent outsider's, then small wonder if the story wanders a little out of proportion.

Summing up this point; in the lower levels stories get distorted by feeble or inefficient newspaper men being informed by feeble or inefficient people. In the more responsible levels men with an inherent capacity for identifying themselves quickly with a line of thought get exaggerated ideas of its importance from men who overestimate its importance themselves.

"Nothing is finally true until it has been officially denied."—Bismarck.

Official communiques are improving but are still characterized by the stylized gestures of a Chinese pantomime. Their writers live in a world where adjectives serve for facts, where 'possibilities must not be excluded', and every statement must be qualified, though they often compensate for cautious qualification on the one hand with rose-coloured exaggerations on the other. A railway siding is usually an 'important marshalling yard'.

Of course, the people who write communiques have many difficulties. It is always easier not to commit yourself. Suppose a thing is not a success—are we to say so? And, of course, it is difficult to say that a thing was not a failure without implying that it was a success. Perhaps one of the main difficulties is that even if the communique-writer knows the kind of thing that would be interesting and reasonable the people providing him with the information do not. It is remarkably difficult to get people to tell you what you want them to tell you. There are many things to be said about almost any operation, however secret, which help to give a good background picture without infringing any security standard. They don't seem interesting to people to whom they are an everyday occurrence, but they make the background and give life to a story.

One of the main faults of publicity men is inaccuracy. A high proportion of newspaper inaccuracies are due to confidently voiced mis-statements by publicity men. Of course, this is not always the publicity man's fault. He has probably been loosely informed himself. The expert or the specialist in a subject is often a source of inaccurate information about that subject because he is so confident that he knows it that he does not bother to check his facts. The people who complain most bitterly of newspaper inaccuracy are just the people who are most at fault when it comes to providing information for newspapers to print.

One question which needs constant watching is whether, when things go wrong, as much information as to how and why is given out as could be, without giving information away.

Because private individuals and newspaper commentators leap to their own confusions, and these ought to be founded on the fullest available facts.

It is perfectly possible for a series of individually accurate statements to add up to a completely misleading picture. Especially as the picture is probably painted by men who believe in it quite sincerely themselves, and anyway there is probably no better balanced picture available. (For you can't wait. That would allow the enemy to get in first and unchallenged with their version).

And more especially as a great effect can be produced merely by implication. If the raid wasn't a failure, then, people say, it must be a success.

## THE MORE THE TERRIER

I FINISHED THE BOOK ONE SUNDAY. I WORKED ALL DAY AND FINISHED about 4.30 p.m. It was pleasant to sit down and read without feeling I ought to be writing.

Like every other unit, we had a great following of stray dogs, five or six living on this platoon alone. I was sitting watching Barter trying to raise a bit of a fire when a man came in, very concerned, to say that one of the dogs had blown itself up on a land mine. I shouldn't have thought it would have been heavy enough, but when we got there the poor animal had certainly been blown up by something; more probably run over. It was in a very bad way, so we shot it.

This was no sooner done than, out of a house nearby, a woman came running, shouting and carrying on.

"Call yourself a man?" she screamed—well, almost screamed—at me. "You fancy yourself, donchew? Shooting a poor little animal. Great coward, you. You make me sick. Don't half fancy yourself, donchew?"

It always takes me a minute or two to find my tongue on these occasions, but once I have summoned up my little stock of self-assertion I think it pays to be aggressive. "Back to your kitchen, you silly trollop," I said firmly; and immediately regretted it, thinking perhaps I had gone too far. But it worked. She stopped in mid-sentence, looked at me uncertainly, and withdrew.

While we were burying the dog one of the men said to me, "That's the only way to talk to women, sir; only way they understand."

I was duty officer. The local Home Guard Commander brought in a water-logged camera found on the beach, "suspiciously near a bomb crater".

The Major, who was going on leave, came into the office to clear up things. I was listening to J. B. Priestley's postscript.

"D'you mind turning that man off, Anthony. He's such a bore."

I said I had been reading an article by Beverley Baxter making just the criticism.

"Oh, really, I can quite believe it; I was in the Cavalry Club one night and he came on and everyone shouted for him to be turned off."

There was a minor air raid during the night. A bomb dropped near the Company office and injured a horse, which we had to shoot.

A man told me he was all through the last war and never heard a shot fired or a bomb dropped. He was an armourer in Southern Italy. Before that he was at Eastchurch being taught the machine-gun by a naval captain. He was there for five months. There were sixty-five desks with a copybook on each and he was the only pupil.

## 23

## THE SMOKE GOES UP THE CHIMNEY JUST THE SAME

BARTER WOKE ME WITH A CUP OF TEA AT 4 A.M. WHAT TIME BARTER had got up made me shudder to think. This was the big day; not a battalion exercise, not a brigade exercise, not even a division exercise, but a great big Corps exercise.

Breakfast had to be bolted, equipment and tin hat jammed on, then find the truck you were riding in. It had all been worked out very carefully and the whole thing was explained at the officers' conference in the mess dining-room yesterday. Who was to be in the forward body and who in the main body, where the regimental police were to ride and where in the convoy the doctor's car was to come. There were to be fifteen vehicles to the mile and they would travel fifteen miles in the hour. The procession would be five miles long and for some reason unexplained it was necessary to travel eighty miles before starting the mock battle.

"Are there any questions, gentlemen? Are you all quite clear?" No, nobody had any questions; yes, we were all quite clear.

But not so clear next morning, because where were the little covered waggon trucks for the officers to ride in? They were supposed to be outside the town hall at 6 a.m. It was dark outside the town hall at 6 a.m.; the moon had gone behind a cloud, so you couldn't see more than a few yards, and those few yards were crammed with tin-helmeted figures nearly all asking where something or someone was; and still more crammed with Army trucks and camouflaged motor coaches. It was quite exciting to watch but infuriating to take part in, especially as no one had seen or knew about the officers' trucks. But seeing that it was the officers' trucks that were missing, something was done pretty quick. It was found that owing to one of the transport officer's less publicized rearrangements they were waiting over the other side of the town at the orderly room.

I followed the other officers along. The officers all walked with a very soldierly bearing to show that if officers could walk along with a soldierly bearing at 6 a.m., then why shouldn't the troops?

They finally started, strangely, near the proper time. The first few miles were along the sea coast. The sea was calm as the moon, which threw a great jagged splash of light down on the water. The sky was pale Mediterranean blue set off by a straggle of cloud and two stars set just the way Raphael Tuck would have liked it.

I was sitting next the driver in a small truck. About a mile out of the town the convoy stopped. There was a ten-minute wait and then inexplicably it restarted and turned down a side road leading back into the town. "What's wrong?" I asked the driver.

"Something's gone wrong, sir," explained the driver.

We drove round the streets and finally pulled up at the starting-place. The sergeant-major was waiting. "I knew some blasted fool would do it," he said. "There's always some blasted fools starts at the wrong blasted time, no matter how many bloody times and how bloody clearly you tell them."

Some of the trucks had been left behind, out of their proper place. They were shunted in and the convoy started off again along the coast road.

The people in the street looked out of windows and stood gaping in street-corner groups watching the column roll endlessly by, each truck and bus with its complement of grim-faced men; grim-faced because it was biting cold. Why ever did people get up at that filthy hour if what they had to do was so unurgent that they had time to stop and stare?

The people obviously thought we were going to be shipped abroad. They watched with sad, kindly smiles and one old crone sitting outside her cottage came across to the truck when we stopped for a minute and said: "Good luck, boys; kill all the Huns."

"We're only going out for the day," I said.

"That's right, son, you got to be careful who you tell anything to nowadays," she said.

The convoy kept stopping for a minute or two to let trucks that had lagged catch up. About five miles out of town we stopped for twenty minutes, waiting to be joined by the umpires; officers from another battalion. The umpires were late but finally arrived. It was cold in the cab of the truck. The windscreen was inadequate and there was no side window. I pulled my groundsheet out of my haversack and wrapped it about me. Then I took it off: it wouldn't do for an officer to look too much like a refugee.

About ten o'clock we stopped with an air of finality. People got out. The men began eating the four cheese sandwiches which were their lunch. The rain had stopped and it was sunny. They lounged around the truck and wondered what was going on. There was no way of telling. All you could see was two or three of the trucks ahead and behind, also pulled up. Every few minutes a helmeted despatch rider would tear along the road, lending a great and spurious air of efficient activity to the scene. One of them pulled up near. "What do you want?" I asked.

"I'm looking for Captain Cartland's haversack rations, sir," he said with a Balliol accent.

It was eleven o'clock before they started again. They went four hundred yards and stopped again. "Been an accident, sir," said the driver, peering out. I got out and ran up the road. It was the despatch rider with the Balliol accent. He had thought there was room to pass between two trucks and there hadn't been. He was lying unconscious, his head nursed in a soldier's lap and blood pouring down his sleeve. Presently he came round. "I'm all right," he said, and tried to get up. "I've got a message to deliver," he said.

"Not the one about Captain Cartland's sandwiches?" I said.

"Yes, sir," he said, and passed out again. We left him by the roadside for the doctor and went on. I had my own worries. The signals officer was away on leave and I had been appointed deputy signals officer. Every few minutes I pulled a message out of my pocket and puzzled over it again.

"Secret. Postpone frequencies for Exercise 821OMB-861OMA."

What did it mean? Obviously it was important. Perhaps the whole exercise would be paralysed if it wasn't acted on. But there was nothing to be done about it. The nearest man who might understand it was two miles down the convoy. Yet something ought to be done. I sat and worried.

About two o'clock we halted just outside a town. The R. and O. group were called for; that meant me. I took my maps and notebook and went to join the little group of Company Commanders and specialist officers who made up the conference.

But the conference never happened. Owing to a slight miscalculation the advance guard had caught the enemy cold and in theory blown them to pieces. They had used a short-cut road which the umpires had forgotten to declare out of bounds.

There was a half-hour wait and then we were ordered to advance, the rifle companies on foot, the specialist odds and ends in the trucks. We rumbled up a lane which petered out about a mile up some rising moorland ground. It was raining again now. Judging by the mud, it had been raining locally for years. Every hundred yards or so we had to get out and push up exceptionally steep or muddy bits.

Three miles later we stopped. Three miles from anywhere, right out on the moors. No one was very happy. We sat sheltering in the trucks. "What about those poor devils walking it?" we said, and carried on about how senseless it was and that it taught nobody anything. But in point of fact it was fine. It would have been far more unrealistic if the battle had gone off as planned, like Aldershot tattoo. There was really nothing to grumble about. Besides, I felt very relieved that there hadn't been any signalling to do. Some three-quarters of an hour later the riflemen began to catch up, walking single file either side of the mud road.

The scheme ended a few days later.

## 24

### THROUGH THE ARMY ON A BICYCLE

SHORTLY AFTER I JOINED THE BATTALION A YOUNG OFFICER CALLED TED came to stay with us. He used to be in the Battalion, but he had been sent on a course and had emerged as a liaison or motor contact officer. The idea of the job was to carry orders to units which had been cut off from the usual communications by enemy action or less dramatic developments. The motor contact officer had to take the orders, find out what was happening and report back to headquarters. Potentially a job of frightening responsibility in battle, it was not at all bad at other times.

First of all you were relatively your own master. Secondly, as the essence of the job was to know your way around and to be familiar with the personalities of the different unit Commanders in the Division, you had to spend a lot of time going round units in the pleasantly irresponsible and relatively entertaining capacity of visiting officer from a higher formation. You had to get to know the countryside over which the Division was operating so that you could find your way quickly wherever you were sent. There was one disability—you were sent on a motor-bike.

But I envied Ted, and when some time later I was ordered to go on the same course I was delighted.

There was first of all to be a short preliminary course held in another town. We were stationed in Malvern at the time and had to travel over every day by motor-bike, this representing part of the course.

First, ride your motor-bike. Under the tuition of my platoon sergeant I slowly learned. I wasn't a good pupil; my strong streak of caution, safety first and taking things quietly held me in check. I clenched the handlebars like death. "Relax, sir, relax," said Sergeant Payne, which seemed devilish advice at the time. We went out several afternoons up and down a quiet road near the platoon billets, and in the end I could jerk along, looking, Sergeant Payne told me, terrified.

The town was about twenty miles from Malvern, if my memory serves me, and we were supposed to be there at 9.30. I thought that if I started at seven I ought to make it just in time.

I did start at seven and I did make it just in time. Two and a half hours for twenty-three miles was at that point the measure of my prowess as a motor-cyclist.

The course was held in the Deanery. There were about a dozen of us, each from a different unit in the Division. The course was run by the divisional motor contact officer. The immediate purpose was to teach us this job in a hurry and also to give us a preliminary training for the full-length course on which some of us would be sent. The motor contact officer was a subaltern like ourselves, but older than most of us, and with a didactic, schoolmasterly approach, which didn't endear him to everybody. We sat in one corner of a first-floor room on those diabolical Army chairs with their special bar across the middle of one's back to neutralize any sense of comfort. There was a fire in the room but the temperature was negligible. The room overlooked some gardens and there was a very fine view of the cathedral.

The course started with a brief outline of its purpose. It sounded depressing and forbidding and difficult. Halfway through there was a knock at the door and a rather extraordinary young man, dressed as for some Himalayan motor-cycle expedition, walked up to the instructor and saluted. He was like Caesar Romero, but with a less heroic approach to life's little problems, because, after hearing some of the difficulties and dangers which lay ahead of us, he got up and said he didn't think it would suit him. He was indignant in that he had been going on a messing course and had been deceived into thinking that this was even cushier. After the first day or two he didn't come any more.

The outstanding personality of the course was a young regular whom I should have found very irritating if he hadn't gone slightly out of his way to be agreeable to me. He challenged most things the instructor said

and was difficult to deal with, being pretty well up in military affairs and having even won an M.C. to prove so. He was God's own show-off on a motor-cycle, running up and down and in and out; and risking everybody's life to demonstrate his virtuosity. He later published a book called *Infantry Subaltern*.

The second morning it had been snowing. I skid slowly down the Malvern Hills with one precautionary foot in the gutter, and premonitions of disaster chasing each other through my mind, not to mention the prospect of being taken rough riding, as announced the previous day. What would possibly happen to me as a rough rider when I was not even a smooth rider I tried not to imagine. Fortunately it was postponed for a day owing to the snowstorm.

Towards the end of the day, listening to a lecture on how to crash, I started contemplating this ride home in all its horrible detail, and gradually got to thinking along other lines.

Four of us came from the Malvern area. Most of the course were very keen motor-cyclists, if you can imagine such a thing among grown-ups, and though the other three from Malvern weren't so aggressively hard-riding as some, they were considerably more hard-riding than I was. They were hardly surprised that I dropped quietly to the rear as we rode away together at the end of the day.

It was a filthy night, snow beating down. I stored the bike unostentatiously in a hotel garage and positively enjoyed the journey home by train.

There was no need to get up so early next morning, so I slept on a little instead of getting up when the batman called me; in fact slept on a little too long and missed the train. I was naturally furious with my own folly, and worried at the prospect of being late for the first lecture which was being given by the Divisional Commander.

I caught the next train, which, owing to the snow, ran very late, collected my bike from the garage and rode slowly through the still falling snow to the Deanery, where I was met by the man running the course.

"I'm awfully sorry. The bike broke down," I was just starting to say.

"Sorry, my dear fellow! You've nothing to be sorry about," he said. "You're the first to get here. None of the others from your part of the world have. Couldn't get through the snow. All rang up. Couldn't get over the Malvern Hills."

I really felt most uncomfortable; not only from my conscience but at the prospect of being unmasked when my real hundred per cent craven spirit was demonstrated in subsequent activities.

Of course he found the real me, as demonstrated the next few days, a little disappointing. I wasn't quite the thruster over the obstacles he expected, but my spirit in making that dreadful ride on a day when nearly all other traffic was off the roads had made an impression which carried me successfully through the rest of the course.

Must have done, because here I was being sent on the long course, candidates for which were, I read, supposed to be expert and bold riders of the motor-cycle. The course was held at Oxford.

At the moment this was a boom town, the hotels were crowded, the streets were packed.

We were billeted in a college two to a room and five to a batman. I wasn't too happy about the latter idea. I was sharing with a Scot. He was off drink because he killed two people in a road accident which cost him £1,800. The rooms were rather blowsy and very bare, though they had a certain amount of furniture; not very attractive furniture, though. After reporting to the Adjutant we were free for the night. I found that the Commandant of the school was at school with me, or rather vice versa. We both took organ lessons. This might or might not be a good thing.

The course looked appalling; 9 a.m. till 7 p.m. every day, and night work.

I had dinner by myself at the George; it was crowded and quite pleasant. You see more solitary diners here than anywhere, and more odd ones. The town might be run by the Café Royal.

My room-mate didn't get in until after midnight. He had been locked out and had to climb over a wall. He said he had been court-martialled for striking a brigadier out in France. I hoped he wouldn't strike me.

I slept on the floor in my valise, but by using cushions from the window seat as a mattress it was quite comfortable.

*Tuesday:* Breakfast was reasonably good. The dining-hall was dark and timbered with refectory tables and benches. I met another man who was on the preliminary, nightmare course, a regular from the R.U.R.

After breakfast the batman told me that it was a very hard course and there were usually one or two in hospital. He pointed out of the window at two figures hobbling across the quad bent over two sticks. "Those gentlemen were on the last course," he said. I could not easily forget this conversation.

At 9 a.m. my old school chum gave the opening address. There could be no less ardent old boy than I, but I felt most concerned that he should be a success and indignant at any critical sniggers. Actually he spoke well, pithily and at some length.

We spent the morning drawing equipment. Crash helmets—"Experience has shown them to be necessary"—waterproof clothing—"It doesn't fit but we can't help it"—tools, maps and books.

Then lectures, lectures all the day.

I feel just as if I were back at school. Looking out at the sunshine just as one used to; trying to be comfortable on the benches; praying for the time to pass quickly.

Map-reading test from 5 p.m. to 7 p.m.; 7 p.m., eh? Every night, too. And there was a great wad of papers waiting in our mail pigeon-holes, including several things to read up by tomorrow. Conversation at dinner was a little sardonic.

After dinner I went out with John Irwin, who used to be on the *Daily Mirror*. We went to the Randolph Hotel. Standing next to each other at the bar were an R.A.F. D.S.O. and D.F.C. and a young man with velvet trousers, rings on his fingers and a red carnation in his buttonhole. Quite a little contrast in war effort.

We spent the evening with people whose whole life seemed to consist

in knowing other people. Never was there such a cavalcade of pretentious nonentity names. Every incident considered in the conversation was preceded by do you know Hugo Earlyman or do you know Brian this or Guy that? All of them taking flats from each other and giving parties at which people threw themselves downstairs, or locked themselves in the bathroom, or had terrible arguments. There is an enormous circle of these miscellaneous, semi-intelligent people. It seems to take an awful lot of mental pretentiousness to produce one good mind.

. . . . .

*Wednesday:* This was the first real day of the course. First a lecture on tactics by the Commandant. I missed this because I was marking up a map which we were supposed to have ready for the second period. It is really rather humiliating how little one's absence is noticed. To mark up a map you clip it under a transparent triplex glass surface which you mark with chinagraph pencils. These are coloured pencils whose marks can easily be rubbed off. You mark your own troops' positions on the map with a red pencil, the enemy in blue and boundaries in black.

We spent the rest of the morning sitting in small groups in the garage listening to lectures on the motor-cycle engine. It didn't excite me.

After lunch we went out for a ride. I couldn't get my motor-bike to start. They said I had over-flooded it with petrol. "Change the plug," the officer said to me.

"I'm afraid I don't know how."

"Good God, man, haven't you ever had a car down?"

Really I couldn't see any more reason for me to have done that than for me to be a qualified linotype operator.

It was a pleasant afternoon. We rode out of the town about three miles, up on to a long, flat, open plateau with a dust surface. Here we rode about at will. The Commandant came up to me. "I didn't realize it was you," he said. "How's the world been treating you?"

But it made a long day having to start again after tea.

"Officers will be prepared to discuss the following eight questions tutorially at 1700 hours. Wed. 19 Mar."

We had been given a list for our homework last night.

For instance, Question 4:

"Infantry must in the end confirm all success in war. Do you agree with this in view of the success of German armoured formations last year?"

We discussed things like this for two hours, twelve of us and an instructor bunched in a group on the front benches of a large lecture room. The discussion was lively, the arguments progressive, but hackneyed to a regular reader of Morley Richards.

. . . . .

*Monday:* After week-end leave I caught the 5.30 a.m. from Paddington. I had a compartment to myself, so I slept. It got there in time for breakfast.

The first lesson after breakfast was another play. This time a series of scenes showing how and how not to be a liaison officer. First there was the funny man doing everything wrong, not having his identity card, not

having his map marked properly, not saluting the Brigade Major on arrival, leaving the most important information until last, not marshalling his facts properly and all the rest of it. Then a nauseating character came on and did everything right.

The rest of the morning was spent in a syndicate discussion. We were split in syndicates of six. Each group had to prepare a plan of advance for an infantry Division. The plans would then be called for and commented on in public, each man being responsible for one aspect of the problem, e.g. whether the advance should be on a two-brigade front or one.

There was a macabre little notice up on the board at lunch time:

#### INSTRUCTIONAL TRIAL

Forty-five minutes will be spent on each hazard.

Number 1 hazard: steep descent with greasy surface.

Number 2 hazard: rocky-ledged climb.

Number 3 hazard: mud.

Number 4 hazard: steep ascent of slimy stone surface.

Number 5 hazard: water.

We lined up on our bikes in the road outside the garage after lunch.

There was the usual appalling symphony of engines revving up. As I sat there, my feet straddled on the ground, waiting to be led off on this devil's chase, it occurred to me that really it would be difficult to devise any more deplorable way of spending the afternoon. Mentally I quivered with apprehension. Forebodings crowded through my mind with the vivid urgency of a life insurance man.

I was pleased to find that I kept up rather better than before. Certainly I was getting much more confidence. We drove about twelve miles out of the town. The first episode for me was riding across a ploughed field, which I managed in slow time. Then ride down a forty-foot precipice. There was, however, a slightly less dangerous way.

Then up an extraordinary morass made of mud and small crazy-paving stones. I was very pleased to get up without falling off.

After these experiences I felt madly confident riding on a level road again.

*Tuesday:* Discussion in the morning. From 11 a.m. we spent the day enlarging a map to a larger scale. First you magnify an inch square of the map four times, then you drive out to the ground and fill in the details which aren't shown on the smaller scale map or which have developed since the map was made.

It was raining miserably.

After dinner we had to go night riding, twenty-eight miles of country lanes in pouring rain with no moon and a route designed to make it easy to lose your way.

Strangely enough, I rather enjoyed it. I don't mind getting wet if it isn't cold. When you get back there is a great sense of difficulties overcome

Today I have been duty officer. This involved sleeping in a special room and staying awake half the night.

*Wednesday:* Today was dominated by my old school chum the Commandant. First there was a notice on the board.

The Commandant has been appalled by an unmannerly and unjustifiable attack on the mess waiters with regard to the quantity of food available at dinner on March 25.

Officers are referred to standing orders, their sense of decency and the fact that they have failed to elect a mess committee when required to do so.

From 9-10.30 we had a meeting to discuss the advance of a division in which each of us was responsible for answering one question. The Commandant called a name out of the hat and the man had to stand and deliver. I was lucky.

The Commandant then gave an impressively well-documented lecture on the organization of the German Army. He described how he had watched the muddle of the German move into Vienna; which was before they had had much practice. He thought the reason the Germans had seemed shy about gas was the possible reaction on their horse transport, on which they relied far more than people imagined.

He outlined the German policy of hammer-blows at the weakest point, but questioned whether it would work here. He also wondered whether the Germans would devise a successful alternative and whether they weren't too committed and wedded to their strategy to change it.

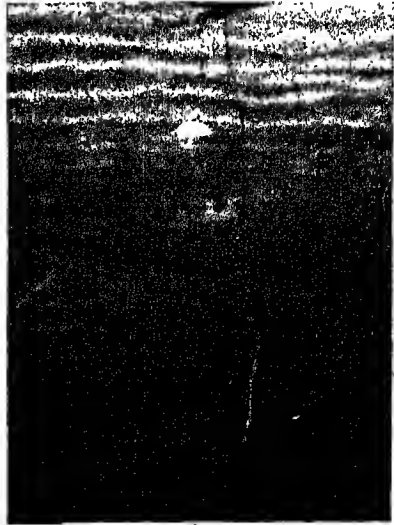
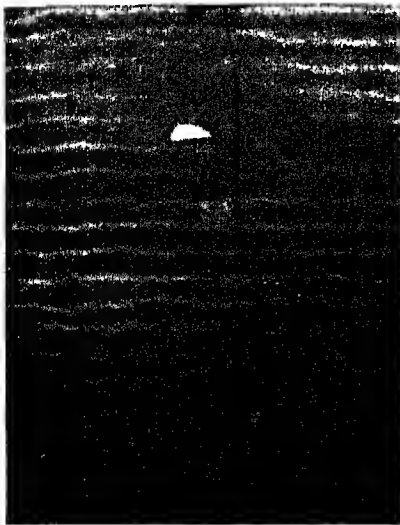
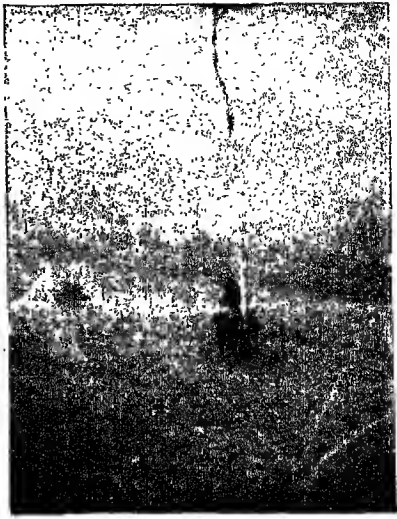
"Like the old gentleman who lives above this room. He came to a sherry party we gave in our ante-room and when we wanted to take his coat out of the room he said, 'No, this is the room you leave coats in.' We said it was no longer a cloakroom, it was our ante-room, and he said, 'This is the room where you leave hats and coats. I have been here sixty-seven years and I know.'"

The afternoon was spent in the garage, listening to another lecture from the Scots mechanic. It was about the carburettor; more I did not learn.

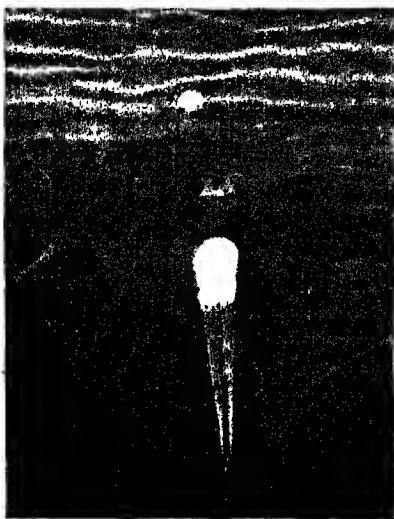
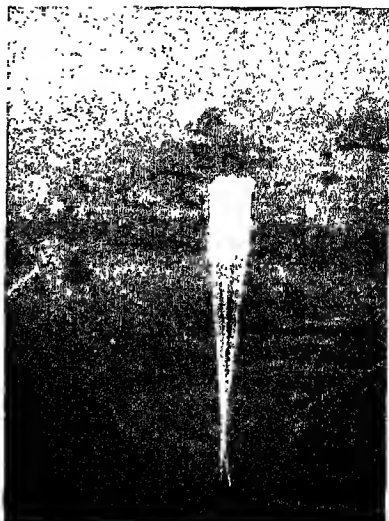
Others seemed to be having the time of their lives, but though I have tried I find it impossible to be anything but indifferent to the internal-combustion engine. From 3-4 p.m. we were ordered to maintenance our bikes, oiling, greasing, blowing up tyres, etc. Someone said I handled the oil-can as if I couldn't believe it existed.

After tea we went across to the Institute. Here in a large basement room with a high temperature was a landscape model thirty feet long. The countryside it represented was supposed to be the ground over which an infantry Division was advancing in support of an armoured Division. We were then treated to a display in which the Commandant and his assistants played the part of the Infantry Divisional Commander and his staff officers. They each had a cardboard label round their necks to identify their roles.

*Thursday:* Starting at 8.30 a.m. we rode fifty miles and had a scheme in which we each played the part of liaison officers given a new problem every two hours or so.



EVERY JUMP IS PHOTOGRAPHED IN CASE OF INCIDENTS



"WE HAD BEEN WARNED ABOUT THE TEARING SOUND AND THE DISCONCERTING  
JERK OF THE OPENING CANOPY

The Commandant and the man who was on the *Mirror* met head-on round a corner and were both removed to hospital. The Commandant, so we were told, landed on his jaw. Irwin snapped his leg. The Commandant was expected out of hospital in ten days. Irwin ought to be able to stand again in six months.

## 25

## A NIGHT AT THE STAFF COLLEGE

The Staff College was very pleasant, set in a park district and most comfortable inside. There were eight of us. We were received by a Lieutenant-Colonel aged about forty.

"What time were you told to get here?" he said.

"Two o'clock, sir."

"I've been waiting here since twelve," he said.

He took us to wash in a very large, white and well-appointed wash-room. Then along a stone-floored corridor to the ante-room. It was large and comfortable, with an outlook downhill to a lake. The Colonel ordered us a glass of beer and then took us in to lunch. The mess room was also enormous and pillared. For lunch we had two pork sausages, boiled potatoes, cabbage, greengages, rice pudding, and coffee in the lounge; also very good brown bread and cheese.

After lunch we were told where to go by the Colonel who had received us. We were acting as liaison officers in a telephone battle with the Staff College students playing the parts of the various staff officers in a division. The time was supposed to be autumn, 1942; a B.E.F. had landed in Europe and advanced for ten days without much resistance. At this point they had come up against a stiffening German opposition. We were to be attached in pairs to the various Divisional Headquarters. He took us round. They were large rooms, empty at the moment except for tables. The Staff College pupils were out for the afternoon reconnoitring the actual ground, then they would come back and work all night planning and organizing the attack.

We were free for the afternoon. De Stacpoole and I went for a walk in the grounds; I bought a couple of books; but we couldn't go far because we were hatless, and de Stacpoole, being a regular, felt unnatural without one.

We came back and had tea, sitting next to one of the students. He said that the college was run by a number of officers, nearly all lieutenant-colonels. They worked from 9 a.m. to 7 p.m. and there was a lot of spare-time work.

After tea we went across to the Divisional Headquarters. This gradually filled up with Captains and Majors. A Lieutenant-Colonel who was umprising our room came and introduced himself.

Another Colonel asked if I would be so kind as to get a couple of chairs. The battle had begun.

A Major came running across the room. "Are you a liaison officer?" he said.

"Yes, sir," I said eagerly.

"Would you get me a couple of chairs?"

When I got back another man told me to go to 5th Infantry Brigade and ask for their strength return. 5th Infantry Brigade were in the next room but one down the corridor. I walked along and got the message. I asked if they had any news or other messages for me to take back. They said no. The atmosphere was now about as hectic as possible, voices all over the room, everyone 'phoning.

"Will you render your casualty return . . . Brigade three is cut off. . . . Who the hell are you? . . . Speak up, man. . . . Where's Jackson?" etc., etc. At this point there was a series of small explosions outside the window. Headquarters was being shelled. Everyone put his tin hat on.

A Canadian major told me that General Awful, the Divisional Commander, was fifteen minutes overdue at 5th Infantry Brigade. I was to go and look for him. I went along the passage to 5th Brigade, who said he hadn't arrived. A Colonel pulled me aside.

"You're someone else, you don't know the General's missing," he said. "Come in here to 6th Infantry Brigade; their maps have been destroyed by bombing and you don't know where you are."

The Brigade Major of 6th Infantry Brigade told me to get some more maps. I went back to Division, and after twenty minutes' interval, to allow for my motor-cycle journey, I asked the G.S.O.3 for maps.

"Aha, maps, but of course," he said, and wrote '100 maps' on a piece of paper. I went back to the Brigade who wanted the maps, and on the umpire's instructions said there were none available. I went back to the 5th Brigade and asked for any further news about the General. They had just sent out a party to look for him. They told me to wait. There was a great noise outside, and an enormous man entered dressed as a French peasant in a tam-o'-shanter and a blue smock. I should have said before that we were all wearing gas masks. The peasant talked French at great speed and tried to steal papers off the table. He said he had blown up a bridge at Goring. As they were taking his finger-prints in green ink the General's body was brought in on a stretcher. I thought it would be Ralph Lynn. It was now 7.15 p.m. I went to dinner at 8 p.m. I sat next to a tall, red-haired Lieutenant-Colonel.

He said: "They say we're all crackers at the end of our time here. Very hard work, you know, trying to keep two or three jumps ahead of the class; normally manage to keep half a jump."

For dinner we had soup, fish and chips, and cheese.

There was very little drinking. "Whisky one-and-six a time; got to do something about it, you know," said the Colonel. "And most people drink before meals instead of with them; do myself, I know."

After dinner I went into the library, very military but a good one; no ban on Secker and Warburg. I was reading in one of the alcoves when I heard a voice up the other end, "Well, I'll lock the door then, sir," and a key turned in the lock. I couldn't get anyone to hear for twenty minutes. Back at the battle there wasn't much doing. My opposite number and I went to bed at 10.40 p.m., sleeping on the floor in one of the lecture rooms. It was very stuffy, and we kept being woken by the French Canadian Captain, who was playing French Fifth Columnist parts, and kept on coming in to change his costume. At 3.45 a.m. someone woke me. "Are you a motor contact officer? Everything's boiling." I was

wanted. I dressed quickly and reported. The job they wanted me for was to go and wake someone else. Then I had to wait in case the General wanted to go forward to observe the battle. He wanted me to walk down the passage with him if he did.

To be woken at 3.45 a.m. for this is bad for morale. I felt as if it would be a luxury to fall down on the floor and sleep. It reminded me of a sergeant who used to say: "You don't want to think, 'Oh ———, another night without sleep'; you want to say, 'Oh, boy, another forty-eight hours and I'll be having a lovely kip.'"

So far as I was concerned the exercise rapidly petered out after this. We kept going over to the ante-room for cups of tea and biscuits. The place was crowded all the time. An officer asleep in a chair was being pointed out; he had been there asleep ever since yesterday afternoon, so it was said. I had a bath about 7 a.m., which made me feel better, and breakfast afterwards. Then I sat around reading the papers, and started riding home at 10.30 a.m. with one or two stops to telephone and to admire the Thames.

## 26

## THE HILLS AND FAR AWAY

WE WERE CALLED AT 2.45 A.M. FOR BREAKFAST WE HAD PORRIDGE, toast and grotesquely dainty bridge rolls containing slices of sausage.

I left at 4 a.m.

There was a mist over the moor and it was miserably cold. I wore a greatcoat, a leather jerkin, three pullovers, a balaclava helmet, a scarf and flannel pyjamas, but I was still cold.

I stopped to get my circulation back about once in fifteen miles, and I rode over the hill into Dorchester, the place where I joined the Army.

There was a strong feeling of visiting the old school. I was tremendously pleased to be back. I felt as if I had invented the place.

The D.S. was in the Central Hotel, where breakfast was provided. I reported and was given my next destination, which was a village the other side of Exeter. I walked out up the street to have breakfast at the Antelope. The street was full of soldiers coming from breakfast. They fascinated me. I wanted to go up to each one and say: "I know just how you feel. I had to put up with exactly the same myself."

The hotel receptionist was having breakfast at the next table. She told me all the news. The doctor didn't come in any more, he was married. So was the dark girl from Judge Jeffreys. But, of course, Miss Gillespie was still there; she must be on the inventory by this time.

I stayed there a couple of hours or more and then drove on. By this time it was a perfect spring day, ideal for motor-cycling, if that is not a contradiction in terms.

When you walk along the air is just a wonderful empty space, but when you go by motor-bike it is full of bullet-spirited pellets which all the time ping painfully against your face. By the time I got to Exeter the first fine freshness was wearing off. Just the other side of it I picked up

Howard Heaton, a journalist who was also on the course. Now, I may (and apparently do) look absurd on a motor-cycle, but Howard Heaton looked macabre. He crouched over the handlebars behind his bushy ash-blond moustache, a black flying-helmet on his enormous head, his body swathed in a cocoon of mackintosh clothing relieved by black leather or cancan thigh-length fishing waders. Like something out of a Disney.

We got to Drewsteignton about two. Drewsteignton is not exactly Paris. The way the residents looked at us we might have been the first visitors for years. But we had a good lunch of ham and salad and jelly and Devonshire cream. Captain Nash then gave us the route we were to follow to Widdecombe. It was through a maze of country lanes. Heaton and I went off together. It was quite pleasant, there being a high standard of weather and scenery, until we reached the focal point of the sector, which was a hill-climb up about two miles of crumbling shifting stones. I got on remarkably well until Heaton stalled right across the track in front of me. I tried to pass him but couldn't, so we landed in a heap. On steep hills it is difficult and painful to stop motor-bikes running away backwards. For, mark you, this was no pussyfoot hill but a sheer precipice climb. I rammed the thing against the bank and waited for Heaton to restart. He was being advised by one of the garage staff who was detailed to act as mechanic-cum-ambulance man.

"Watch your wheel spin, sir," he shouted above the infernal concert of the engines.

"How can I watch the wheels, you fool? I can't see the blasted, bloody things!" roared Heaton, infuriated.

We got to Tavistock about 6.30 p.m. and found we were out of petrol. We tried to get some from the unit stationed there but they were very unhelpful. We finally got some from a headquarters a few miles away.

By this time it was getting on for 8 p.m., so we rang up H.Q. to ask if it would be all right for us to come straight there without finishing the course.

They said yes, and we set off. There were four of us and we hadn't been riding ten minutes when the man behind me, a French Canadian, broke down. One of the others gave him a tow. They got about a mile and then, going down a curving steep hill, the Canadian got his front wheel jerked out of alignment and crashed, sprawling along the road with mysterious flames coming out of the bike.

He was all right except for being bruised and shaken, but he didn't want any more towing. I stopped two old farmers and asked them where I could telephone. They might as well have been talking Zulu for all the sense I could make of what they said. Eventually they pointed the way, and I found a 'phone about a mile up the road. I rang up H.Q. and directed them where to come to fetch the Canadian.

It was now 8.40 p.m. and dark, so the last twenty miles to Holsworthy weren't very amusing.

There was a meal waiting at the pub. I had little separate fatigue zones all over my body. We slept in a drill hall.

There was no need to get up until 8.30 a.m., but, of course, there were plenty of fools up before seven. We had breakfast at the pub and started, away again at 10 a.m. We had another stretch through country lanes,

then all along the coast to Porlock Weir. It was a lovely day, and, all things considered, I didn't feel too tired. Riding along I thought of writing a biography of Hutch, the singer; it could be quite a significant social history. Really the West country is a lovely part of England. I rode up one terrifically steep hill just outside Lynton and stopped to look at the sea and the hills around it. Even with the bike engine running it was soothing. I switched off to get a bit of peace and a voice boomed in my ear: "And this is Bruce Belfrage reading it." I started up again.

Coming into Lynton I met de Stacpoole and Buchan. We had lunch at the Valley of the Rocks Hotel, which had the same musty cigarish smell that French hotels have, or used to have. We lingered a little over lunch and left about 3.30 p.m. After Porlock Weir I made straight for Taunton. The danger of motor-bikes is the way they tempt the least aggressive spirit to show off. God knows there can be few more cautious drivers than I. My dominating thought is the possibility of accidents. I treat all other vehicles as if they were controlled by dangerous maniacs. Round every bend I expect to find some fool careering along on the wrong side. At high speed the possibility of a puncture is always in my mind. A stone in the road and I anticipate being thrown. Above fifty I hear bells ringing—ambulance bells. But in spite of all this I find myself swooping through villages trying to impress the locals.

This last stage I urged the thing on at all speed consistent with safety, because I had rung up and arranged to take a girl out to dinner.

## 27

## LAND IN SIGHT

THE COURSE CAME TO AN END. I SAID GOOD-BYE TO ONE OR TWO ENCHANTING people I had met there and reported, as ordered, to London. Yes, sir, to London. Boy, oh boy!

We arrived at London District H.Q. at 3 p.m. The other two had gone up already and I met them walking along a passage with a very military Major. He took us into the G.Ops. room. It was a large, pleasant, cream-coloured room with ten table-type desks and comfortable chairs. There was also a carpet, which is more than one normally gets.

The Major gave us each a copy of the London Defence Scheme—a bound typescript like the MS. of a small book. We sat and read it for twenty minutes; heavy going, but good human-interest stuff.

It was then suggested that we should go upstairs to see about our allowances. We were led up to a small room where there were two Captains sitting—all Guards officers in this building, by the way, hundreds of them. One of the Captains was plump and knowing; the other tall, dark and with an appropriate moustache.

We explained who we were and what we were supposed to do. He then looked up our allowances in a book—fuel, fire, lighting, lodging and servant. It took more than an hour because there are different allowances for married officers who live with their wives, and officers whose wives live away from them. As a single officer I got 8s. 1d. a day, he told me—inaccurately as it afterwards turned out.

We were then through for the day. I took someone to see *The Philadelphia Story* and then to supper at the Café Royal. I stayed the night at Brown's Hotel and reported as requested at 9.30 a.m. on Thursday.

Next morning it rapidly became apparent that no one knew what we were to do, especially as the file about us had been lost and the man who, it was generally agreed must have it, was out. We hung around for an hour and went downstairs to the military police to get passes to enter the building. Then finally the file was found. As a source of information it was, of course, almost completely useless. The great problem was whether we were to remain in London or be posted to one of the Brigades around London. We had the Major all convinced that we were supposed to remain in London and then a sergeant-major came in and reinterpreted the letter to mean that we were supposed to be posted away. A Lieutenant-Colonel then came in and was appealed to and said yes, we should be posted away, especially, he added tactfully, as we were not wanted at the headquarters. My feelings were mixed.

I caught a Green Line bus from Victoria and arrived about 6 p.m.

No complaints about the mess, I must say. A large, pleasant house with good Surrey views all round. One thing about the Guards, they know how to look after themselves.

In the absence of the Staff Captain on a course I was shown to his room—a grandiloquent affair with its own bathroom and verandah.

There was then the usual time-filling pause. The house seemed empty and stayed so until twenty to eight, when half a dozen came in. Dinner was at eight; there were ten at the table but no Brigadier. We had clear soup, roast beef and angels on horseback, all very eatable. Conversation was on a lofty plane. Can a genius be contented? Why did Shakespeare run away from home? Can an actor be creative or only interpretive? Now Massine was creative because he was his own choreographer, but Nijinsky was just an interpreter. No, no, he was creative; he lent his genius to the roles he danced.

It was cultured as hell, though five of the ten contributed nothing but an occasional platitude. I enjoy these port-fuddled dialogues.

The Brigadier arrived back from London after dinner. I had the usual conversation about my military history, and future. He seemed very pleasant and even amusing.

*Friday:* I was called at 7.40 a.m. with a cup of tea. For breakfast there was porridge and egg and bacon, but no jam or marmalade.

I walked down on to the Golf Course; the second hole was at the bottom of the garden. It looked very inviting, but golf courses no longer fool me. I have suffered too much in those sylvan hells. I was then shown the composition and operational idea of the Brigade by Lord Rosse, who was the Brigade Intelligence Officer.

He gave me a voluptuously overflowing pile of files and went off to Aldershot to get some maps, leaving me to read the files. There never was a more difficult way of learning about a situation than going through these files, which are always out of date and mostly irrelevant.

I hadn't been sitting there long when a Colonel who had been pointed out to me as the permanent Chief Umpire of the Brigade came in and asked me for the composition of the recce. unit of a German infantry

division. He went out of the room leaving me with not the remotest idea of what he had asked for, as I had thought he must be talking to someone else. But fortunately the corporal sitting behind me had taken notes. All the men in the room (they were the Brigade Intelligence section) started prodding through the handbooks, but they couldn't find anything. They went downstairs to ask the orderly room and they still couldn't find anything.

"Try one of those Army Training Memoranda, Corporal," I said. "Try number twenty-eight," I added for no reason at all. And he did, and there it was. That's leadership for you.

After lunch I asked the Brigadier if I could go home to collect my kit, and, as I rather hoped, he gave me the week-end off. I left immediately.

I sat in the Intelligence Office watching Rosse dealing with the mail. Presently, seeing me doing nothing, he threw me a copy of the last Army Training Memorandum, copies of which are issued periodically to all officers.

I was delighted to find *What! No Morning Tea?* recommended for reading by Army officers. Leaving this casually open at the right page, I retired to my room and worked there for the rest of the day, emerging only for meals and a walk round the golf course.

At tea-time I was introduced to the C.O. of the Irish Guards.

"He probably won't be staying, though," said the Brigadier. "He's going off to write a book or some such thing; isn't that it, eh?"

"He ought to stay here and write a book about a Guards Brigade; stay two weeks with each of the battalions."

"That's what I'm afraid of. That's why I'm trying to get rid of him," riposted the Brigadier.

How we all laughed.

*Tuesday:* I was sitting typing in my room after breakfast when Rosse came in with a letter marked 'Confidential'. It was my report from the Liaison School for me to sign. It described me as:

*An officer with a pleasant personality who appears to lack the necessary amount of enthusiasm and drive. His written work has been rather disappointing, but he is capable of doing a good job.*

After lunch Rosse took me on a tour of the Battalions to be introduced to the commanding officers. They all seemed to be quite comfortably situated except the Household Cavalry, who weren't actually in the Brigade but were attached to it for a scheme.

The Household Cavalry were under canvas. They insisted on us having a drink, though it was only 4 p.m. When we got back I had to spend the time before dinner marking up maps and making notes for this conblasted scheme. There was also a conference attended by officers and sergeants, presided over by the Brigade Major, who was a new arrival.

Dinner was rather a dressy affair. The Brigadier was entertaining the C.O. of the Welsh Guards and a Major who had escaped from Brussels. We had some good soup, salmon, boiled beef and spinach and asparagus. I sat next to a young man with a voluptuous blond moustache which was the subject of ironically admiring comments from the Brigadier.

We talked about night life and Mr. Gordon Courtney. The young man had fairly recently returned from India. He described Army life in India as he had known it.

"Get to the Company office about nine; nothing to do, absolutely nothing, never a thing. Go out to the dairy about ten for a glass of milk. Spin that out for about half an hour and then back to the Company office. Still nothing doing. The men were all mounting guard, you see, so there weren't any to do any training. Go over to the mess about half past eleven and have some lemonade or something. Then back to the Company office and then lunch. Sleep all the afternoon. Play tennis or ride before dinner and dance after."

*Wednesday:* I went down to the garage to draw a motor-bike at 9.30 a.m. I hadn't been on one of the beastly things for three weeks; it was too good to last.

We started about 10 a.m. I rode in a group of motor-bikes just behind the first truck. These convoys travel at about 12 m.p.h. The last time I rode in one on a motor-bike it was all I could do to keep up, but now that I had become a rough-riding star it was rather tedious. We were on the road for four hours. At one point I broke away from the column to get a cup of coffee and, oddly enough, found myself at the same place where I broke away from the column on our way to Chichester and was told off by the Major for doing so. However, on this occasion I rejoined the column without comment.

About 2 p.m. we arrived at a house where Brigade Headquarters was set up in the grounds. I hung around trying to keep up with the situation, which was no great strain, I must say, but no one wanted me except the Brigade Major, who wanted me to move my motor-bike; so I withdrew to the R.A.S.C. truck in the rear and wrote. It was then 2.40 p.m. and high time we had lunch.

"What do you do most of the time?" I asked the R.A.S.C. officer.

"I don't know really. If we were on active service I'd be about the busiest of the lot, but now it's a rest cure."

Lunch appeared at 2.45 p.m. We had it in the house in a very pleasant room looking on to the garden. Cold meats, tinned peaches and cheese.

"Well, deck-chairs and a sunny corner this afternoon, I think," said the Irish Guards' Colonel, who was acting as Brigadier for the exercise.

"And shall I say a late dinner, sir?" asked Lord Rosse.

"Eight o'clock, I think," said the Colonel.

I dozed on the lawn after lunch until the Brigade Major called me over and sent me to find the M.T. officer. A cloud then came over the moon. I rode round miles of country lanes without finding him. Eventually I rode up to a small group of transport parked under some trees and was asked for my identification card. I said I hadn't got one and had never had one, which, owing to one thing and another, I hadn't. So, being a Lieutenant Quartermaster, he arrested me and took me to his Battalion H.Q. I was identified by the Acting Adjutant, but it was one of those stupid stories which everyone laughs at. I have an unholy knack of appearing ludicrous in military conditions. When I got back to Brigade it had been reported and they all seemed to think it funny.

Halfway through dinner I was called out to ride behind the Brigadier's car to the new and advanced Brigade H.Q. This was about eight miles away, temporarily established in a garden. I was sent back with a situation report. I rode like the wind to salvage my reputation, found the complicated way perfectly and arrived very soon. They had all gone; they had moved. No one had told me, and as I was so late I hadn't been there to hear.

It was now 10.45 p.m. and getting dark. Anyway, I was riding the thing round until 1 a.m. and feeling most unhappy. When I finally arrived at the new Brigade H.Q. I didn't know whether to report to the Brigade Major with my completely out-of-date message or whether nothing said soonest mended. I decided to say nothing and went to bed. I was called at 4 a.m. to be duty officer; this meant sitting waiting in case anything happened. About six o'clock the Brigade Major sent me out to the Welsh Guards to tell them the situation.

"You ought to be back in an hour," he said.

I found the Welsh Guards in a rather broken-down, isolated house. The officers were sitting round on the floor.

"Ah, it's our Quisling," they said.

I found I hadn't the remotest idea of what the situation was to tell them, so I asked them what they wanted to know. They wanted to know when they were going to be moved.

I rode back like a mad thing and told the B.M., who said they would have been told this by this time. I was then approached by the Staff Captain and told to find the conblasted man I couldn't find last night. He was 'somewhere on the road between Herriards Common and the Brentworth House'.

Let me draw a veil over the rest of the day. Exactly the same thing happened. I couldn't find him, and when I finally gave up and went back to Brigade they had moved and no one knew where.

I had to talk to three women, one of whom owned the house we had stayed in. One of them, not the owner, was mad at our having used it.

"Did they know who we were?" she said.

I said that if we had known who she was we should never have come near the place, which for some reason seemed to please her.

I rode on again up and down roads crowded with men and trucks. But no one knew where Brigade H.Q. had moved to. Eventually I saw three ambulances and followed them.

I may mention that by this time I was completely exhausted, and shortly afterwards I was stopped by an umpire who pointed to a man in the ditch with a rifle pointed at me and said I was captured. I was sent back to their H.Q. under escort. Unfortunately, I had the entire operation orders in my map case—quite wrongly, of course. But I pointed to some aeroplanes and while my escort gaped I managed to stuff them down my trousers.

I finally got back to Brigade H.Q. at tea-time. The new H.Q. were in a large country house converted into a school. The exercise had now ended, but we had to hang about for two hours before starting for home. It was a four-hour journey home, all done at 12½ m.p.h.

After lunch next day I was called in by the Brigade Major and told that I had been transferred back to London with effect from tomorrow.

## A 'PHONE OF MY OWN

SATURDAY: I GOT TO TOWN ABOUT 10 A.M. AND WAS TOLD TO REPORT TO Lord Edward Hay, the G.2 Training. I was taken along to a room about thirty feet long, where there were five men working.

I was introduced to one of them—Captain Horace Noble, the G.S.O.3 Weapon Training London District. He quickly explained that the idea was to relieve him of some of the spade-work.

"We'll get you a table," he said. "Now sit down and look through this file. Just look through it. Don't try to learn it by heart. We'll get you a table and you can start a file of your own."

It sounded just the very thing. There was such a cosy, settled ring about the phrase 'We'll get you a table'.

But, of course, it didn't last. Just as I was preparing to retire for the week-end, Lord Edward said he had a job for me. He took me along and introduced me to a Captain in the Field Security Police. We were told to report at the White Hart, Windsor, at 8 p.m. Not so good. I fixed up a motor-bike and took O. out to lunch at Kettners. It was quite pleasant, which is more than I can say for my ride down to Windsor. It was raining so hard it became extremely painful to the face if you went at any speed. And I was riding a new bike which needed adjusting in some way, because the engine kept stopping except when I wanted to pull up. This was difficult owing to the ineffectiveness of the brakes. Three times I overshot traffic lights. I hung my things to dry in the hotel boiler-room and met the Captain in the lounge.

He told me that C. A. Lyon was one of his clerks. Half an hour later Lord Edward came in with two Colonels. We were taken in to dinner, during which they told me that I was to spend the night in a river steamer, and shortly before dawn attempt to make my way into Windsor Castle, armed with false papers. Thus testing the anti-Fifth Column defences.

The steamer was already fairly full of soldiers when I got there, but I managed to find a rather precarious, very narrow passenger-seat down in the saloon, and got what sleep I could. I was woken shortly after three and set out on my dangerous mission.

As the streets of Windsor were packed tight with troops arresting everyone in sight, my career as a Fifth Columnist was quite short. I did what I could when they pulled me up, but my papers were palpably phoney, and they marched me off to a barracks, where, after being interrogated, I sat and read the *Army Quarterly*.

*Thursday:* They installed my telephone. My first call was to ask why my new motor-cycle hadn't been delivered yesterday. It seemed that it would be today.

I found an Army booklet in my 'in' tray which pointed out that one should never stick a fork in meat to see if it is cooked; this causes it to lose its natural juices. Press the meat with the fingers, and if it is rubbery and elastic it is uncooked, but if it is firm and resists, it is cooked. Having absorbed this hint I placed the booklet in the 'out' tray.

The afternoon was frenzied. There was an important conference on and I had to organize the distribution of varying numbers of different pamphlets to various Colonels and Brigadiers, not to mention putting out the pencils.

*Friday:* On my next day off I caught the 1.15 p.m. from Paddington to Reading, where I was met by an A.T.S. car containing a lance-corporal driver, a sergeant, and a rather attractive officer who giggled a lot, but pleasantly. She told me that she was in charge of the clerical school where the clerks were trained, and that Aldermaston A.T.S. Depot was well equipped and run, but miles from anywhere.

I was taken to see the Commandant, a domesticated-looking little woman with a last-war medal pinned incongruously in her bosom.

A great deal of very slapdash saluting was going on all this time. I went with the officer who had met me and fixed up for her to get a class to write essays on 'What happened and how I felt during my first week in the A.T.S., and how it differs from my old life. Say what your old life was and how you spent your spare time.'

I also asked two A.T.S. sergeants to take shorthand notes of typical barrack-room conversations. I wanted to get one of the N.C.O.s to write a diary for two weeks, but the Commandant suggested that they should all do it in a competition.

I had tea in the officers' mess, which was quite extraordinary: a big room heavily wooded and with about twenty women of all kinds. Most of them might have been schoolmistresses, though maybe that was the effect of the job. After tea we watched a P.T. class; they were playing patball, mostly dressed in bloomers, and one, the prettiest, wore a blue overall.

"Who's the good-looking one?" I asked my conductor. She asked me which girl I meant. She said that after living a few weeks in a world of women you lost all critical faculties; you didn't look to see whether a girl was pretty or not, there was no need to.

Having had little to eat all day, I went to a Chinese restaurant to fill myself cheaply; hungry though I was, it made me glad not to live in China.

*Saturday:* I had to go down to Westminster Hospital Medical School to count the number of seats in a lecture hall to see how many officers we could accommodate for a lecture on Libya and to test the acoustics by addressing the caretaker, who stood at the back of the hall with his back to me.

On the way back I called in at the National Library for the Blind. They had written to ask permission to put *What! No Morning Tea?* into braille. The secretary, a very nice woman called Miss Prince, took me round. It is a big building. There are 63,000 blind people in this country and 15,000 use this library. There are also other sub-libraries. The normal volume takes up four volumes of braille. *Gone With the Wind* takes twenty-one. Favourite authors are Edgar Wallace and Ethel M. Dell; also coming along well is H. C. Bailey. They read braille passing their hands over the pages like playing the piano. The right hand acts as a warning of what is coming to the left hand, which does the actual reading.

*Monday:* A man rang up and asked rather tartly if I had done anything about the loss of tomatoes at Royden on February 25th, 26th and 27th, when troops drew the greenhouse fires.

When I build my dream house the lavatory will have double swing doors like they do in the washhouse at the billet.

Captain N. rings up about a sergeant's battledress trousers. They were burnt through no fault of his own when dealing with a phosphorous bomb. Captain N. understood there was some question of the sergeant having to pay for them. He just wanted to point out that it wasn't the man's fault.

Sent out to sub-areas to hasten up their returns on practice rifle-firing by Home Guards. Told to take the line that if you can't provide returns then, by Heaven, we'll get men who can.

One of the major problems disposed of today was the Colonel who wished to make a journey to Wormwood Scrubs by train. He had done so before and paid for it out of the Battalion funds. He now wanted to transfer the responsibility to Army funds. After a short conference between G and Q branches this was successfully arranged.

My next appointment was to visit the prisoners-of-war cage. They were in a big private house with a lot of wire and military police about. I saw only six. Three naval and three airmen. All very young-looking and rather sulky. They were lethargically filling sandbags. Apparently the naval ones are the sulkiest.

On my way home I stopped in the Park and got talking to a man in uniform who was standing on the steps of a building which turned out to be a hospital for bathing accidents and suicides. He was once accused of stealing money from a suicide's pocket.

"Where was the money?" he asked them.

"In his hip pocket."

"Well, then, it's impossible. If I had taken money out of that pocket the lining would have come out with my hand, and I couldn't have got it back without putting the body in the water again. Try it and see."

### ABCA-CADABRA

ONE SUNDAY AS SOON AS I GOT TO THE OFFICE A CLERK HANDED ME A War Office wire.

*2 Lt. Cotterell required temporary duty War Office for 14 days with view probable permanent staff appointment. Required report Hotel Victoria D.G.W. & E. Branch 0930 hrs. Monday 30th June.*

I looked around affectionately; be it never so humble, everywhere seems wonderful when you are leaving. I decided to go for a ride on my bike. I told Captain Noble I was going to do a bit of liaison with an ordnance depot and rode away.

The ordnance depot was not very gay, but I was. I even did a bit of voluntary rough riding in the fields behind it.

The telegram wasn't entirely a surprise, though I hadn't been expecting to hear so soon. I had been sent for the previous week to see the Director-General of Welfare and Education, Major-General Willans,\* at the War Office. It was 3 p.m. and very hot. The General was in shirt-sleeves, very young and efficient-looking, full of charm but also eagle-eyed; the sort of man who would like being contradicted up to a point. He had got me here because my name had been suggested for a kind of bulletin they were starting. It was being started with the sanction and approval of the highest military authorities and the idea was to increase the ordinary soldier's interest in the war, to raise his enthusiasm to go in and win. "We want to get rid of this pernicious idea of we can take it. Stop being passive and turn aggressive."

He asked if I was interested. I said I was absolutely and completely interested; and when he said that if I was hired I should be made a Staff Captain I was fascinated. There was to be a non-journalist with the rank of Major as editor and two Staff Captains as assistants.

He asked me the story of my life and whether I was financially tied to the *Express*. I answered the first question with practised fluency and said that my financial ties to the *Express* were negligibly slender. The interview lasted half an hour.

When I got back from the ordnance depot Colonel G. was there. I went in to say good-bye; I was sorry to say good-bye.

I arrived punctually at the Hotel Victoria and was introduced to my immediate chief, who was black-haired and beaming, with last-war ribbons and a moustache; he was, in fact, Bevil Rudd, the celebrated athlete. We were told to go upstairs to Room 529 on the fifth floor and come down again at 10.15 a.m. for the daily Welfare Branch Conference.

Room 529 turned out to be a rather dirty, unfurnished hotel bedroom, though with hot and cold running water. The messenger explained that there were three rooms allotted to our activities, so I took Room 529 for myself, and Captain Rudd took one of the other rooms across the corridor, a rather superior room with bath.

The conference was very informal; there were eight or nine of various ranks from Captain upwards in the room. The General presided; he introduced Rudd and me and then asked each one in turn what they had to discuss. One man said that the widows of R.A.F. and naval men were allowed cheap railway travel concessions for three months after their husbands' death and that this obviously ought to be extended to Army widows. The supply of wireless sets for troops in Iceland was discussed. It lasted about twenty minutes. As it broke up a tall Major asked me to come and see him afterwards.

The General saw us for a few minutes and told us to go upstairs and plan the thing. Everything was up to us, and if we wanted anything, come to him. On the way upstairs I called in to see the Major, whose name was Radcliffe. He told me that he had read my book and suggested my name for the job; they had traced me through his brother, who was the chief censor. He then asked me out to lunch. I mean, you couldn't help liking the man.

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\*General Willans has since been killed in an air crash in the Middle East.

The chief messenger of the fifth floor introduced us to our own special messenger, an enormous man named Asker. "I'm deaf, sir," shouted Asker, holding his hand to his ear. "Had me ear all taken out." However, he brought us a very nice cup of tea.

The Major took me to lunch at the Junior Army and Navy Club and afterwards we sat out on a verandah overlooking the Thames; several of the people who had been in the conference joined us.

On the evening of the third day Stephen Watts arrived to join us. I hadn't known him before, though I used to see him around the *Express* building; but he was on the *Sunday Express* and I was on the *Daily Express*, and though they then occupied the third and second floors respectively, the staffs were separate and didn't mix much.

We settled down to discuss what form the bulletin should take. For days on end we discussed this. We both found it a delightful change.

First we had to find a title. We decided to suggest the title "War", which would enable us to answer the telephone with the words "This is War". Our suggestion was accepted.

*Tuesday:* We spent the morning with the printer discussing types, the relative merits of modern and old face, and how big the headlines were to be.

My brother Geoffrey sent us a story about an A.A. crew shooting down a German bomber; our first outside contribution; in fact the first thing written specifically for it.

Our staff arrived. We showed her into an empty room along the passage and explained what we were doing; she didn't seem very convinced. She said that it was a rather funny position in that she had been hired as a clerk and not as a typist, and although she was a typist and would like to go on doing typing, still it was a funny position.

It was cleared up a bit later on by Bevil, who came in and said the official ruling was that she would act as liaison between us and the typists' pool. When Watts and I finally stopped laughing Bevil said: "Well, she'd be useful when we're all out."

We took our specimen issue of the bulletin down to the General. By the grace of God he approved of it. "Well done, boys," he said. His only criticisms were that we must make a stronger point of the fact that all officers must use the pamphlet to enlighten their men and not just to read it themselves.

Hammond, the head civil servant of our directorate, came up and said it was proposed that we should move down to the second floor. On the point of prestige it seemed a step in the right direction and the rooms were certainly an improvement on our present attics.

I started getting my first story, a fairly lengthy affair about tanks, from Captain Barker, who was then just fresh from Libya. I came back and worked on it until 8 p.m.

*Friday:* We got to the office next day to find half the furniture moved from our office but not yet moved into the new office. We hung about for two hours utterly bored and demoralized. Then we had a conference with the General which demoralized us some more. The subject was criticism of our specimen issue.

The criticisms were that the stories we printed didn't give a Platoon Commander material for lectures. In future we were to write the stuff specifically as material for lectures with guidance about giving them.

The General came in to see how we were getting on. He said he thought everything was coming along well, that he didn't want us to get the idea that he was crabbing when he criticized, but he thought we had to do everything we could to anticipate criticisms and meet them where possible, and then take a stand on a certain line of policy and refuse to deviate from it.

"Remember, nothing people like better than to say something from the War Office stinks," he said. "Oh, nothing they like better."

I said that what worried me was not people being unwilling to help; but their being incapable of doing so.

"Yes, I know what you mean," he broke in. "No time. No one's got any time in the War Office."

I said in my opinion one infallible way of telling that a man wasn't much good was when he kept saying he hadn't got time to do things. The General said he quite agreed and that there was no surer sign of inefficiency than the man who was never able to get away for a day off.

We had a conference with the General in the morning and another one after lunch, on the question of whether we should have some trial issues or go straight into full circulation. And should we necessarily have a coloured cover; would it be just as good and much cheaper to have a white cover with some kind of coloured band across it? I said I wasn't at all keen on the red cover as it was. "Then for God's sake why didn't you tell me?" he said. I said I thought it was axiomatic that we should have a coloured cover. He said I was paid to think, not to sit and take things for granted.

When they told me I was going to be a Captain I wasn't in any great hurry to have three pips on my shoulders, but this morning I felt quite reluctant to go out in my other coat which hadn't got the pips on yet. The appetite for position feeds on the growth of it. Privates don't want to be lance-corporals, but lance-corporals are anxious to be sergeants.

A recurrence of labour troubles in the afternoon. The typist complained that there was still nothing to do and said she was thinking of applying for a transfer. As Watts said, some people are incapable of any form of sacrifice for the war effort. Supposing we complained that we had nothing to do.

*Tuesday:* There was a conference with the civil servant who looks after War Office publishing, or, anyway, our side of it. It all sounded very smooth except for the clammy-handed phrase 'treasury approval', which crops up all through these discussions.

When the civil servant had gone the General turned on us, and 'turned on us' is the right term to use.

"I am extremely worried, and the more I think about it the more worried I become—about what came out last night. The fact that you have been keeping your opinions from me." He raised his voice, he banged the desk. "Now that is absolutely fatal. What the devil do you think I have you here for? It isn't for your appearance. It's be-

cause you're experts and I want to know what you think. I don't care two pennyworth of cold gin what you say, whether I agree with it or not; but for God's sake say it."

Watts said: "Well, in civilian life, sir, I was certainly not afraid to speak up, but since I've been in the Army my whole training has been not to."

"Well, forget it, man. What's the good of fooling about like toy soldiers? Forget I'm a Major-General or anything else. It doesn't matter a damn. What we're here for is to beat Hitler, and we're not going to do that by place-saving crawling."

I spent the afternoon at Spicers, the paper merchants, going into the question of what quality paper it was necessary to use.

Bevil came in with the news that we were likely to be completely merged with a new and large scheme called the Army Bureau of Current Affairs, in which case we should come out fortnightly. Any day now we expected to wake up and find ourselves a children's annual.

We were, in fact, drafted to the Army Bureau of Current Affairs, which was then in process of formation under the direction of W. E. Williams. In case you aren't familiar with the workings of this remarkable and successful organization, they are as follows:

Each week a bulletin is published, *War* one week, *Current Affairs* the next. *War* deals with military subjects, e.g. Airborne Troops, Dieppe Summary, Army Food. This is written almost entirely inside the War Office. *Current Affairs* deals with what you would expect and is written by outside writers, individually picked to cover a certain subject.

These bulletins are circulated to all officers and quite extensively in the other services. A period is set aside once a week, in the training programme for a discussion of the subject of the week, which is introduced by the troop or platoon officer, on the basis of the bulletin. Also published fortnightly is a particularly well produced Map Review.

A great deal of the rest of the book consists of my experiences while working in the War Office for A.B.C.A.

## QUICK MARCH, PRIVATE WYNNE

MY FIRST CONTACT WITH THE AMERICAN ARMY WAS TO INTERVIEW PRIVATE Bernard Gerard Wynne, who was twenty-four at the time and not unlike Mickey Rooney.

His military career started on October 16th, 1940, long before U.S.A. entered the war, when the 17,000,000 American men between seventeen and thirty-six registered for military service. Our subject was given a card. On one side was his name and address: Bernard Gerard Wynne, 58 Ninety-first Street, Jackson Heights, New York. On the reverse side the card reported him as "White, height 5 ft. 7 ins., weight 145 lb., complexion freckled." He was also given his draft number, 1038.

In U.S.A. you are called up by ballot. The numbers are picked out of a bowl in Washington. When the number 158 is picked out the men

in every district all over the country whose number is 158 have to report for military service. This was, in fact, the first number to be picked out of the bowl. After hearing that his eligibility was Ar, Wynne himself heard nothing until the 8 a.m. post one Tuesday in January, when he received an official letter bearing greetings from the President of the United States, congratulating him on being selected as a member of the Armed Forces, and telling him to report in ten days' time to Governor's Island, in New York Harbour, for a medical.

After the medical he was asked what branch of the Forces he would like to serve in. He said he didn't know, and was directed downstairs to a room where five Lieutenants sat behind desks. He went up to one of them, who said, with a smile: "Congratulations, you are accepted." Wynne was so surprised that he said: "Thank you." He next received a card with more greetings, telling him to report to a local centre at 6 a.m. in two days' time (usually five days) prepared to travel to the Induction Centre, where there would be another medical examination. The card went on to say that failure to pass this second medical examination would be celebrated with free transportation home.

The Induction Centre was a barracks sixty miles away. After the medical they were outfitted with nearly everything but rifles and blankets.

The clothes worn by the American soldier in the field are olive-drab wool trousers, a wool shirt open at the neck and worn without a tie, stout laced boots coming just above the ankle, and canvas gaiters which come from ankle to knee.

The new M-1 helmet, worn by the American soldier, somewhat resembles the 'coal-scuttle' helmet of the Russians and Germans. It affords a maximum protection to the neck and eyes of the soldier. It is particularly interesting in that the helmet is made in two pieces. A fibre casque, cushioned with webbing, is worn when the soldier is not in the zone of fire, and affords considerable protection from the sun. The steel part of the helmet is carried slung over the left shoulder when not in use, and is only donned upon entering the scene of action. It is of the same shape as the fibre casque and installing it is merely a matter of slipping it over the casque and fastening its chin-strap.

One dodge often used for fitting boots is to make men hold a fifty-pound load to test how far feet spread in full kit. They spent almost the entire day in queuing up, followed by fatigues, Wynne making rather a conventional débüt by cleaning the latrines.

They were given intelligence tests. Two men fired questions at each recruit, such as: "Six and five are ten—six and five is ten. Which is it?" If you are quick you say "Eleven." If you aren't so quick you give your theory as to whether it should be 'is' or 'are'.

About two weeks later the results were announced. The marks were out of 150. About eighty-five to ninety-five seemed to be the average. A man who does badly is called a 'zombie' (a bad marksman is a 'bolo').

They stayed at the Induction Centre for five days, the last four being pretty unoccupied. At 3 p.m. the following Monday afternoon they entrained for their basic training at a replacement training centre. They got out of the train two days later, and 1,200 miles away at a small cotton

town in Alabama. They marched up the road to a large-tented camp. The size of the camp was forty-nine square miles, with a high incidence of mud, and accommodation for 35,000 men. There are larger camps—one, for instance, holds 70,000 men.

They were put four in a tent. The other men in his tent, all New Yorkers, were Sid Kazen, a house-painter; Walter Kimmer, liftman at the Waldorf Astoria; and Abe Wyloge, truck-loader in a fur house. All four were aged between twenty-two and twenty-four. Incidentally they were accustomed to earning five to seven pounds a week. One of their main topics of conversation was the difficulty of getting along on a soldier's pay (fifteen pounds a month minimum abroad, twenty per cent less in U.S.A.). We find it difficult to see what they have to grumble at, just as, no doubt, the French soldiers couldn't see why we were complaining at two shillings a day. And just as we do, the U.S. soldier grouses at the high wages paid to U.S. munition workers.

They were called the next morning at 5 a.m. (Normally 6 a.m.)

The moon was still out. As Wynne was not madly anxious to get up, the sergeant turned his bed over on top of him. At 7 a.m. they were marched two miles and set to clearing woods, the point being to loosen their muscles up. At 11.30 a.m. they marched back for lunch. At 1 p.m. they went out again until 4.30 p.m. They were then free for the rest of the day, except for the ceremony of Retreat, at 5 p.m. They had to dress for Retreat—which is a Company parade.

The Company are brought to attention, they stand at ease ('Parade Rest') for forty-five seconds, while the bugler blows 'Retreat'. Then the parade is brought to attention, while the bugler sounds 'To the Colours'. The Commander salutes in the direction of the post flag, which is being lowered for the day. The Company Commander then delivers some beneficial homily.

They asked about leave—they were told that they weren't to be allowed out of camp for twenty-one days. Week-end leave started after three weeks—twenty-five per cent were allowed to go the first week, after that it was cut to about eight per cent of the Company. Week-end leave ran from 6 p.m. Saturday to 6 a.m. Monday. For most of them the fare home to New York was forty pounds by 'plane or about six pounds by train. As the train took twenty-three hours there wasn't time to get home and back.

When they got back in the tents the Company whistle blew for evening chow (all meals are called chow).

After that most of them went to the canteen—called P.X. (Post Exchange)—where they could get the normal N.A.A.F.I. range of supplies, but no hot meals. That closed at 9 p.m. One and a half miles away there was an Army Service Club, a brand-new brick building with good lounges, thick rugs, pianos, radio, billiard tables and ping-pong tables. In another section of the building was a restaurant where you could get a steak, fried potatoes, apple pie, and coffee for about two shillings. Each Battalion normally has a large recreation hall.

They had to be back in bed at 11 p.m. Later on it didn't matter so much what time they got to bed.

There was also a gymnasium two miles away which was taken by Companies in turn, but there being 35,000 men in the camp, a Company's

turn may come round only once in three months. There was also a cinema—a wooden building with benches and concrete floors, admission one shilling.

The second day was the same as the first. The third day they were issued with rifles. For about the next week they concentrated entirely on marching, rifle drill, military etiquette, personal hygiene, and other items of individual training, from 7.30 a.m. to 4.30 p.m., with an hour for lunch. Then they were marched back to their Company area and set to cleaning things for the evening formation (parade).

They learned: Parade Rest (stand at ease), Attention (attention), Right Shoulder Arms (slope arms, but on the right shoulder—not the left), Port Arms, Present Arms, Trail Arms, Left Shoulder Arms. In marching the change from right to left shoulder, or vice versa, is ordered about every half an hour.

Having half mastered arms drill, at the end of the week they spent three days stripping and learning parts of the rifle. In some camps they have to strip and reassemble a rifle blindfolded. They spent a week learning the standing, lying and kneeling loads. In the lying load they have to get off ten shots in sixty seconds with the bolt action, or fifteen shots with the Garand. The new U.S. rifle is the semi-automatic Garand. It weighs about nine pounds, and uses some of the gas of one explosion to reload itself automatically. The clip holds eight cartridges, and when the last one is fired jumps out. Records of forty aimed shots a minute are not unusual with this piece.

They then started marching. The first hike was two and a half miles with a light pack (the light pack would contain a shelter half and tent rope—each shelter half constituted fifty per cent of a two-man tent). They march in route style (at ease). They march mostly in threes or fours, sometimes in twos. On a formal parade they form in columns of twelve or sixteen.

Three days later they did a five-mile hike with the addition of a blanket, suit of underwear, pair of socks, one handkerchief and toilet articles.

Five days after that—seven and a half miles with the addition of two entrenching tools each and a raincoat. The first hour they marched for forty-five minutes with fifteen minutes' break; the second hour they marched for fifty minutes and got ten minutes' break.

Five days later, owing to a storm, they didn't do the ten-mile hike. But three days after that they did a twelve-and-a-half mile march. That was the day the heat-wave started.

The march was arranged to get home ten minutes before lunch. The rest of the day they spent at bayonet practice. Three days later they did fifteen miles.

In the meantime they had been learning to handle and fire light and heavy machine-guns, also the bayonet and rifle.

At least once a week they would spend an hour seeing training films. Also once a week there would be a lecture in the evening—either military or current affairs.

Two months after their arrival they went on their first scheme. (The Americans call it a field exercise.) Fortified by a piece of bread-and-jam and a cup of coffee, they started at 7.45 p.m. on a twenty-mile hike.

Wynne had a splitting headache and a bad stomach to start with, but he didn't go sick, because he would have been called a 'gold-brick'.

They arrived at 2 a.m. and slept by the road until 5 a.m. They then marched a quarter of a mile and were ordered to pitch tents and to go to bed until noon. By the time they had pitched their tents properly and had breakfast (sausage, hot cake and coffee) it was nearly 9 a.m. Half an hour after they were ordered to move off. The scheme lasted four days and four nights.

During two weeks considerable time was spent learning how to read a map and to make a sketch-map. They had aircraft recognition for about two days. All this time systematic record was kept of how well or badly everyone did at everything.

During the last week of the first three months they didn't do very much at all. But up to then the atmosphere had been extremely business-like. They were kept hard at it six days a week, but Sundays they were completely free and needn't get up at all.

Notice that Miss Dorothy Lamour didn't call on Private Wynne once. There were dances on Wednesday and Saturday nights, the social ratio being normally about 400 soldiers to twenty heavily-chaperoned girls. Towards the end of their three months' recruit training Wynne headed a committee which organized a formal dance in which the whole Company entertained 200 girls from a college in a town some miles away. This was however, an outstanding enterprise.

From the song and dance point of view they were unlucky in being at an isolated camp in the south. This camp was also unlucky in being in one of the counties where prohibition is still in force. They could buy no drink in the town and only beer in camp.

At the end of thirteen weeks they were posted away, most of Wynne's particular Company to specialist jobs.

As Wynne had technical training, he was posted to an Air Corps Signal Company, rather an unusual transfer. This brought him much nearer home—only 1,000 miles away.

He asked for furlough. They said he could have twelve days. He rang up and arranged to get married. His fiancée bought furniture and rented an apartment. There was then a slight hitch. He was sent abroad, unmarried.

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## ROOF OVER BRITAIN

I WAS ASKED TO WRITE THE OFFICIAL ACCOUNT OF THE ANTI-AIRCRAFT defences, to be called *Roof Over Britain* for publication by the Stationery Office. Colonel Walter Elliott, then Director of Public Relations, pointed out that it would be a rush job, and there was no time to lose. The book was to be on the bookstalls by spring if possible.

So it was; but the wrong spring—1943 instead of 1942.

In the course of writing it I spent a day with General Sir Frederic

Pile, Commander-in-Chief of A.A. Command. It is a pleasant change to be on the inspecting side instead of the inspected.

Twenty minutes out of Newcastle the Commander-in-Chief's car drew up outside a mixed battery site. He got out, attended by a Major-General, a Brigadier and a Brigade Major. The Battery Commander and his Colonel were at the gate, apprehensively excited.

Inside the gates stood grouped some of the officers and a little to the side the battery sergeant-major. Like a man seizing a long-awaited opportunity the Commander-in-Chief hurried to shake hands warmly with the sergeant-major, to comment on his medals, to ask who was his commanding officer in Egypt and establish mutual acquaintances. Then he shook hands with each officer and asked to be taken to one of the gun pits.

The A.T.S. were waiting at the fire control instruments probably more eagerly than the men at the guns. But it doesn't do to give all the attention to the A.T.S.; you must make an obvious point of taking equal interest in the men. The main concern is that the men should speak up for themselves; a battery is judged largely by the mood of their answers to his questions. If the men seem afraid or reluctant or, worse still, indifferent, there is something wrong. At the time the General may seem very uncritical. His main purpose is not to pick flaws but to encourage people, to 'show the flag', to make people feel appreciated. It is part of his trade to know when to allow himself to seem deceived. The General has the insistent likableness of a spaniel; it strikes a tenuous balance between familiarity and authority, neither too hearty nor too remote. He is never at a loss for something to say, perhaps something very ordinary and obvious, but infused with the warmth and confidence of his personality the platitudes surge to new life.

He inspected the girls at the fire control instruments, climbed down into the command post, walked across and shouted up to a girl doing maintenance work, watched a squad of girls marching—"Very well done, Sergeant, very good indeed"—inspected an A.T.S. barrack room and listened to a story of badly made boots, expressed surprise and disappointment that the girls weren't keen on shower baths, and went into the kitchen.

"Eggs? Are those really eggs? Never see them outside. How often do you get 'em?" Meanwhile there were agitated and audible whispers between the Colonel and the Battery Commander.

"Where're the men cooks? The two men cooks? I sent you two men cooks."

"You had them back, sir—last Tuesday, sir."

"Yes, but I sent them out again. Where the devil are they?"

The procession walked down to the gate past a bayonet-fighting class, who, encouraged by the prospect of release, were giving a final climactic display of aggressive spirit. He paused at the gate. "Now who aren't we going to see again?" He shook hands with four officers, punctiliously remembering each name, and then, "I must say good-bye to my sergeant-major." He hurried twenty yards to shake hands, and with a final clinching smile all round he was in his car and away. A ten-minute drive and the pattern began to form again.

Two more visits and then to a fighter station to talk with the Fighter Group Commander. The Commander-in-Chief sat in the mess in an arm-

chair with his Group Commander on one side and the R.A.F. Group Commander on the other. "Now how are you two boys getting on together?" asked General Pile. The two boys declared their mutual satisfaction and the conversation turned into technical channels.

Lunch was taken at Brigade Headquarters after inspecting the gun operations room, which was in the same fairly large suburban house. For lunch there was fish and jam roll; the conversation was entirely shop. The Brigadier raised the problem of keeping Lewis gun detachments in good spirits. He instanced one case of a detachment guarding an ironworks which had never been attacked and probably never would be, and if it was it wouldn't be much good trying to defend it with a Lewis gun. The Commander-in-Chief made a note of the circumstances on an envelope and promised to see if they couldn't be moved. Odd to think how many personal lives might be affected by that casual scribble. Perhaps if the Lewis gunners had been left there an extra month the detachment cook might have married the local policeman's daughter; perhaps the detachment would be moved somewhere delightful, perhaps somewhere horrible.

The first call, after lunch, was at a mixed battery site where not many days previously there had been five feet of snow. Quite unexpectedly the girls had shown less concern than the men. Disciplinary action had been necessary to make them put on adequately heavy clothing. Eleven local newspaper men were waiting to photograph and interview the General. He stood between two A.T.S. girls at an identification telescope while a third girl pointed up into the sky. "A little over to the left, Sir Frederic, please. Hand a little higher, please, miss. That's right." The seven camera men strained and concentrated and clicked their shutters. "Just one more, sir, may we have—with the whole thing swivelled round. Yes, that's right, thank you."

The reporters asked him what he thought of the north-east coast defences. It was not perhaps altogether surprising that he didn't indulge in any violent criticism.

Another excursion I made to find material for *Roof Over Britain* was to the Dover area. I travelled down with John Pudney, who was writing a section of the book on the Balloon Barrage.

This gun operations room is a small, subterranean room with a sloping floor and irregular walls. There are about seven men on duty all the time. Three of them sit facing one wall, three facing the other, and the seventh sits at a small telephone exchange. One trio are working for the guns, the other for the searchlights. They all have headphones or telephones. Their job is to plot the path of the raider, to receive and re-broadcast news of his movements which may come from a searchlight site or from the fighter sector control room, who in their turn get it from the Observer Corps. Thus the fire of the guns can be directed and controlled.

The gun control officer works in the next room. Directly anything of any significance starts coming over the 'phone he is summoned by a bell. Three men hear the same information on their headphones, for instance this:

"Stand by for broadcast . . . two three hostile Robert eight three west one aircraft at six thousand."

The three men each have different jobs to do. The spotter chalks the location of the hostile aircraft on the talc window of a map of the area. The second man writes down the message in the raid log, the third man broadcasts the message to the gun sites.

At the moment the room is very quiet. Two are doing a crossword puzzle, one with a dictionary. Two are writing letters. One reads the *Daily Mirror*, another a book with an exotic cover picture; one is smoking reflectively, one has gone to the canteen. Through, in the other room, the intelligence officer is writing his daily report, the gun control officer is making himself a cup of coffee. It is pleasantly peaceful with the calm of people who have been together a long time. It is very quiet for a few minutes; then one man says something into the 'phone and writes busily. "Okay," he says, and hands what he has written to another man, who says, "Stand by, ringing. . . . Don eleven . . . night movement of aircraft BH nine one stroke two six and one fife . . . Spitfires two Robert six fife . . . south-east and east out to sea, okay Hawkinge you may clear."

The warning messages go on throughout the morning. Usually the aircraft suspected to be hostile are verified as friendly almost immediately. Sometimes the impersonal technicalities relax into conversation. "No, I been. Yesterday afternoon I went. Very good, wasn't it? Ta-ta, Les."

Then a message comes in from the Fighter Sector control room for the searchlight sites. "Your target is now five miles out to sea and is just starting his first run on bearing 260."

An exercise is starting. In the aircraft (a Lysander) sits a Colonel piloted by a Wing Commander. They were touring the country, and may still be at this moment for all I know, conducting detailed aerial inspections of searchlights, mostly by night, but often by day. I flew with the Wing Commander on one occasion.

Daylight inspection of searchlight beams is not so unproductive as might be imagined. The men on the ground can't see whether they are catching the aircraft in their beam, but up in the aircraft the beam is just as strong by day as by night so long as it keeps within about ten degrees of the target. They fly at 2,000 feet, from which height a heavy-gun site looks about six inches in diameter, with the guns like beetles, and a searchlight site is a crumbling palaeolithic vacancy, in which it is difficult for an inexperienced eye to tell whether there is a light or whether the site is disused. The Colonel sits in the back seat talking over the telephone to the Wing Commander in front. "One coming up to us now. There's another one over there; what's he doing? Ah, that's better. Can you see your marker beacon? We're getting out of the area."

For whereas an enemy aircraft does everything possible to get out of the area, the Colonel and the Wing Commander hover hopefully, delighted when they are illuminated, discouraged when they aren't.

Pursuing the process of writing *Roof over Britain* doggedly through, I visited a searchlight site.

The site was a fenced-in enclosure of irregular shape about a hundred yards across and with a fine all-round outlook on tidy parkland.

There are two wooden huts in the enclosure, a semi-circular corrugated iron Nissen hut, a wash-house and a battered shack standing a little apart. The huts are grouped together by the entrance to the enclosure. The searchlight is forty yards away. There is also a Lewis-gun post and a tractor-like affair up the other end of the enclosure connected to the light by a cable; this is the generator.

On this comfortable, lazy summer afternoon two men are digging on the allotment and three others are sprawled full length asleep on the grass. A searchlight detachment varies in strength from fourteen down to a minimum of about six. On any one day there is probably one man on seven days' leave and another having twenty-four hours off. It isn't often that more than one man can be spared away at a time. On isolated sites, by the time he has cleaned himself up, walked to the road and thumbed a lift to the nearest village, where there isn't anything for him to do anyway, it is time for him to come home. Though, of course, not all sites are isolated. A cliché has been built up around the isolation of searchlight sites, but in fact most of them are reasonably near some kind of town or village. Some are right in the middle of large towns, but they still get out only once a week, so that some men find it less tantalizing to be really undeniably isolated.

Inside the sleeping-huts most of the rest of the detachment are asleep. It is a wonderful day outside, but Army life makes you appreciate a fug.

The sleeping-hut is twenty feet by eighteen feet with a corrugated-iron roof, composition walls and a concrete floor, which produces endless dust. A wooden floor is warmer to the feet but it may also be draughty. The joints and lining of the hut are well worn from being constantly dismantled and re-erected; already this has happened eight times. In the middle of the room there is a stove.

There are seven iron beds with mattresses. Each man's four blankets and kit are folded and laid out in regulation Army fashion at the foot of the bed. His spare pair of boots and his plimsolls are laid out in the prescribed way on the bed-rail. Round the stove there are two fire buckets, two sandbags and a stirrup pump primly arranged.

Gas capes are hung up on one of the end walls, covering a newspaper map of the world and framing a projecting shelf. On the shelf there is a neglected-looking mandoline, a hair cream bottle half full of rifle oil, a book called *The Lewis Gun Mechanism Made Easy* and two photographs, one of two small children, the other of an intensely respectable-looking girl dressed to go out. At the other end of the room there are some bookshelves and a Red Cross case. On the shelves there is a cake of blanco, a bottle of household ammonia, some ink, a broken fountain-pen and two shelves of books, mostly sixpennies, but including one called *How to Play the Hawaiian Steel Guitar*. Searchlight sites come by most of their books casually, gifts from passers-by, and only too often these are paper-backed novels written, published, read and forgotten some thirty years ago.

The eating and recreation room is a Nissen hut, one of those semi-circular corrugated-iron buildings. Its main furniture is a trestle table and two benches, a stove, a radio, and another trestle table used as a desk

by the Detachment Commander and carrying a field telephone. It is bare but very clean; the radio does a great deal to humanize the atmosphere. A door leads to the kitchen, which is extremely well equipped with a solid-looking range and carefully clean pantry. It really is a most satisfactory-looking kitchen. Round the back of the kitchen, also in the Nissen hut but approached by a separate door, is the wash-house. The usual Army design of several taps over a communal gutter-like sink, and the usual broken fragments for shaving-mirrors.

Really, one feels there isn't much to worry about here, and in fact there isn't. But things weren't quite so comfortable until a week ago, before the Nissen hut was finished.

Until then the kitchen was a ramshackle hut eight feet square, with a ramshackle field oven. The window didn't open, so the only ventilation was by keeping the door open, a process which blocked the light from the window and hindered access to the stove. Food was eaten in one of the sleeping-huts and they needed a new valve for the radio, so that the general standard of living was appreciably lower. However, things were quite under control now, so, on the basis of past experience, they would probably be posted somewhere else any day now.

The atmosphere of a site depends to a large extent on the personality of the Detachment Commander, usually a bombardier. With a little imagination and personality he can infuse a considerable feeling of domestic comfort and happiness, but it is a testing job for a young man to keep his detachment from getting depressed and stale. He is very much on his own; the troop officer, a subaltern, doesn't get round more than once a day, and it isn't usually a particularly varied life. One day is dangerously like another.

It starts relatively late, for searchlight men are essentially night workers. If they have been in action or on an exercise they have all been up most of the night. Even if they haven't, the sentries, the duty engine hand, the duty N.C.O. and telephonists have been on duty all night.

Anyway, they are probably all up by eight. After breakfast and laying out their kits they have a formal parade with perhaps some drill under the Detachment Commander. The morning is taken up with maintenance of equipment, lectures and general training.

After dinner the men are probably free until stand-to, though there may be huts to be repaired or lined, drains to be dug, paths to be made, or gardening. If they are free they read, write letters, or talk about the girl on the gramophone counter at Woolworths, but chiefly they listen to the radio, for it is pleasant to hear someone say something you haven't heard him say before.

At dusk there is manning drill and a routine test of equipment. Another day is ended. Whether or not it is a happy day depends on trivial things, mostly perhaps on the personality and efficiency of the officers and N.C.O.s. If they show a human interest in their men's contentment and comfort, if the men can be made to feel that the authorities are on their side, then murder can be got away with in the way of conditions and discomfort.

Now here is the funny answer. This site I have been writing about is just off Piccadilly. On the face of it you would say that here was the cushiest of all billets, and certainly it isn't a bad one. But, as you were

supposed to gather from the story, it doesn't really make all that difference where you are, and in some ways it is much more tantalizing and discontenting to have the world at the bottom of your garden when you can't leave the site than it is to be in the Orkneys. Besides, Piccadilly isn't all that convenient on about three shillings a day. When I last visited them they were hard put to find a hairdresser within easy reach. The shops around the corner work to rather fancy prices.

. . . . .

To report on the Maritime Anti-Aircraft Artillery I went for a trip up the east coast in a collier carrying 4,000 tons of coal, or, it needs be, eighty Army trucks. I went aboard from a pitching drifter up a pitching rope ladder. The master showed me into his cabin, which had a bunk down one side, a tall cupboard, a settee and a desk, a small iron safe under the desk, and a small glass-fronted bookshelf. In the saloon next door the mate was having bacon and sausage for breakfast. I joined him and the master sat and watched.

"Hope we have a better trip than last time," he said.

"Ay," said the mate.

"Terrible rough last time."

"Ay," said the mate.

"Chap fell down the hold. Broke both wrists, internal injuries and lacerated his brain."

"Conscious all the time," said the mate.

"Terrible sight he was."

"He was that," said the mate.

But it turned out a very tranquil trip on the whole; very pleasant paddling up the east coast in sunny, winter weather. I was making the trip to report on the Army gunners. There were three of them, and three naval ratings, taking turn and turn about to man the ship's defences, which were concentrated on the consistently swaying, pitching poop. It isn't an easy job, they told me. You no sooner get your sights on the target than the action of the sea jerks you off them. One of the difficulties of defending a ship is that it is full of obstacles in the line of fire—derricks, funnels, masts, etc. But men like the life for the freedom it gives them. While at sea they are very much their own masters. They go all over the world, and while some of them have been torpedoed five or six times they consider it a cheap price for getting away from life in an ordinary Army unit. On the other hand, one of the gunners in this ship had been two years and three months in Maritime Artillery in fifteen different ships, and hadn't been attacked once.

The gunners' quarters, which they shared with the naval ratings, consisted of one four-bunk cabin and another with two bunks. The four-bunk cabin was in immediate proximity to the engines, which, together with the intense heat, especially after the black-out, formed an admirable emetic. They messed in this cabin on a small table fixed to the wall. The two-bunk cabin was even more like life in a submarine. Quarters vary. Sometimes they are almost luxurious, sometimes intolerable.

## SHIPS THAT PASS IN THE DAY

IN A HORRIFIED KIND OF WAY I HAD ALWAYS WANTED TO GO ON A BOMBING raid.

Arrangements were made for me to fly with the American Fortresses. First I was sent on a course at a Combat Crew Replacement Centre, where they give refresher training to reinforcements newly arrived in this country, and also prepare non-flyers who have to fly for one reason or another.

There were two others in the class, Colonel Jock Whitney, the American millionaire racehorse owner and tycoon, and a young man who was introduced as General Eaker's aide.

The Colonel was youngish and amiable, though naturally not unaccustomed to having his point of view appreciated. General Eaker's aide was volatile and instantly well-informed about almost anything.

The schedule was rigorous and devoted mostly to the .50-calibre machine-gun, which we were supposed to learn to fire and maintain in case the occasion arose. We worked under a corporal instructor in a gymnasium which had been partitioned into classrooms. For some periods we joined the general class. It was reassuring to find that none of them took notes. I never have much confidence in people who take a lot of notes in lectures. They were all in leather or mackintosh jerkins and were obviously suffering from a sense of anticlimax, having arrived in this country geared for action and being immediately plunged into this end-of-term revision.

"When you hear the term 'tail attack' it doesn't mean he's overtaking you. He'll never do that. It means he'll end up at your tail. He's gonna have to follow a curve of pursuit until he ends up dead behind your tail. That's a very common form of attack. With our ships it's usually from above. . . .

"How many in here can judge a second exactly every time?"

One hand was raised.

"I can do it, but it takes practice," the instructor went on. "That's the way to estimate speed."

We were taught how to behave when forced down into the sea. You all go into the radio compartment and pack down on the floor like sardines, sheltering your head in your arms and keeping the knees slightly bent. There is a terrific forward momentum when the aircraft hits the water, and no matter how smooth the sea may be, the water comes up to your waist. There is a considerable jolt on landing and another when she finally settles, so you don't move until she comes to a standstill.

The engineer and his assistant get out first to see that the life rafts have successfully launched themselves from the wings. You all climb in, carrying the emergency radio, and get away quickly; not because of the suction but because of the unpredictable behaviour of the tail when the aircraft breaks up.

Even if the Air/Sea Rescue people know your position exactly, it may be thirty-six hours before you are picked up.

We went for an altitude flight, partly at 30,000 feet. There was no particular sensation except a sudden feeling of coldness and a progressive tendency to flatulence.

Next day we went for an artificial altitude flight in the oxygen cabin. There were five of us, the Colonel, the Captain and two strangers. We sat locked in a sort of fortified caravan with white walls and a thick glass panel at the end through which the doctor watched us. He addressed us through a loudspeaker. We sat facing each other as if in a tram. The doctor's amplified voice: "We'll go up at four thousand feet a minute and come down slower in case anyone has ear trouble."

In a very short time a mist formed in the cabin. "You're getting in a cloud," said the voice. It was appreciably colder, like an autumn morning, though outside the cabin there was heat-wave weather. There was no sound except the persistent tapping of the pumping machine. One man was rather affectedly reading the *New Yorker*. Voice: "Now we're nearing ten thousand feet. Put your masks on." A little later: "Now we're doing twenty thousand, going on twenty-five. Take out pens from your pockets or the ink's liable to leak." My stomach began to rumble.

Presently, one at a time, we had to take off our oxygen masks, stamp our feet and hands, then write our names as many times as we could before passing out. The rarefied atmosphere feels quite normal without artificial oxygen. That is the danger of it. You don't realize that you are just going to pass out. I managed to write my name once, but I wasn't conscious of the second attempt, which was a meaningless jumble, tailing off as I lost consciousness. The others managed to write their names two or three times. Evidently I am not the Himalayan type.

There was a great sense of stomach comfort as we descended to 20,000 feet, though a slight painfulness in the ears. The idea is to inoculate people against the temptation to feel that they can do without their oxygen if, say, they want to move about the aircraft. I found it a completely convincing demonstration.

There were many more lectures on the .50-calibre gun.

"Whether it be one gun or a lot of guns we always do the paper work, using similar triangles . . . lock the gun in that position . . . this distance here is 'x' . . . gives us the distance from the line of bore to the line of sight. . . ."

In lectures you are either bored because you understand what the lecturer is saying or because you don't. (Thought recorded at 1.40 p.m., the afternoon's work starting at 1 p.m.)

The Captain was an intelligent follower: "I don't see that. How can it be a straight line from the back of the barrel to 'x'?"

The Colonel was dogged: "I missed something there. I'd like to have you go over that again. I didn't quite get it. What I'd like," he said, "is a lecture on calibres, the bigger ones and all that."

"We don't need that," said the Captain.

"May as well get ourselves a little free education," said the Whitney millions.

There was a constant stream of new arrivals from America. At night their voices could be heard in different parts of the hut. One man said that General Montgomery had been made a Lord and would get a great

palace and a hundred thousand pounds a year. He regarded this as decadent and feudal.

"But we get as much as an English full Colonel as Second Lieutenants," said another man. "I wanna go home, damn it."

Next morning we drove down to the miniature range at the far side of the airfield. Our instructor had brought the wrong key, so we sat waiting in the car. It was 8 a.m.

"You got egg all over your mouth," said the Colonel to the Captain.

"I'll clean it off with some of that soap from your ear," riposted the Captain.

Presently the keys arrived and we fired the .50-calibre on the range; it makes the most formidable noise.

A week or two later I was sent down to an airfield for the actual excursion. The first opportunity was on the Monday afternoon. They were going to bomb airfields in France.

### *Monday*

After briefing, the pilot and I drove round to the aircraft in a jeep. The pilot's name was Sprague; he was ruddy-cheeked and taciturn. The aircraft was parked in a circular bay just off one of the runways, with a group of men working on it. The pilot disappeared to superintend, and I was approached by a young man who said: "You the navigator? Yelvington's my name. Afraid I'm just a greenhorn. This is my first mission." I was about to console him that we all have to begin somewhere, when it suddenly occurred to me that my very life might be jeopardized by his greenhornery. Sympathy instantly evaporated. It turned out that he was to act as co-pilot on this mission to give him some experience for operations with his own aircraft.

Presently eight men drove up in a truck, each carrying one or two machine-gun stocks. They sat down on the ground and cleaned them. We were each given a packet of Spearmint and a Mars bar. An hour went by before climbing into the aircraft, which felt its way out on the runway at 4.45 p.m.

I sat in the nose surrounded by guns and ammunition upon a sort of counter normally used by the navigator, who was sitting on a box of ammunition studying his maps with a pair of dividers. The compartment was bullet-nosed, mostly of glass, and filled with belts of ammunition stored in knee-high wooden frames overflowing rather untidily on to the floor. Right up in the nose the bombardier sat on another case of ammunition, making adjustments on an instrument panel.

I will now switch into the present tense, because most of this was written in the aircraft.

The whole thing is in a state of frenzy and vibration and discomfort. Not at all in keeping with the spectator's view of the way a bomber seems to drift into the air; it makes me apprehensive about my stomach.

The ships are crawling towards the take-off like great bats in the sunlight. I am suddenly alarmed that I have left my parachute behind. It is handed to me to keep on my lap. No room elsewhere. Both young men are very preoccupied. There seem to be no arrangements for being sick. No sign of the paper bag provided by commercial air-lines. One of the three enormous machine-guns is banging about uncomfortably near

my head, which it hits from time to time. Now we are moving. Just passing the ambulances. I think it would be more tactful to keep them out of sight.

We are flying just to the right and behind the leading ship. In the air the bats look like newts.

"If I use this gun, scam back there, Major," said the navigator, "and if I use that one, get over there."

A pleasant sense of fatalism comes over me. The business of not being bothered by responsibility or having to make decisions. There is nowhere to put anything. Have just put cigarette butt in pocket. Seems a pity to dirty the floor. The bombardier has gone aft, so I have a perfect uninterrupted view through the glass nose. A large irregular hole in the glass nose has been patched. Shrapnel, I suppose. Oh dear. The thing about being an Englishman with Americans is that one feels bound to behave with as near an approach to sang-froid as is possible, though I suppose that would apply if one was with the English. They were rather tactless at the briefing. It hardly seemed the time for the Colonel to complain about faults in the gunnery, even small ones, or to paint nightmare pictures of the vulnerability of loosened formations. Funny to what an extent your main concern is how other people will react to your behaviour.

I am not overdressed. Just a summer flying-suit, over-boots and an American jockey-cap. In fact the others are wearing more than I am; and with my low blood-pressure. The navigator is still doing advanced geometry. No one tells me anything. I hope I am pulling my weight. I just noticed fifteen other Fortresses out to the right. Probably been there quite a while. The hell of an observer I make. We are approaching a solid bank of cloud. The land below is disappearing. It is just like suddenly finding yourself in the Arctic. There is another formation of eighteen on our left.

Navigator: "We are going up now. Put on your oxygen mask. Bombardier, check the Major's oxygen gauge, it don't seem to be working. I can't see it going up and down."

Some time later the mission was cancelled owing to weather not being clear enough for precision bombing. We turned back from the English coast.

I was surprised to find myself feeling frustrated instead of reprieved; as if I had made an unsuccessful attempt at seduction. All those hours of flying just to turn round and come back; and incidentally that was quicker said than done. We had to fly several hundred miles and then go through all the business of circling round waiting our turn to land. Then, when you landed, instead of feeling heroic, you felt plain ludicrous.

We got back about 8 p.m. I ate in the Combat Crew Mess-hall, which was much more rough and ready than the ground officers' mess. The idea of separate messes is to cater for the flyers' eccentric hours. Sometimes they have to eat very early, sometimes very late. By American standards 8 p.m. is outlandishly late for dinner. I went to the movie show. They were showing "Desert Victory", which was very well received. It was a big hut with backless benches and a far from perfect projector.

Next day, Tuesday, there was another mission.

*Tuesday*

Briefing was at 1 p.m. Much the same as yesterday. The main excitement is when you come into the room and see for the first time where you are going. The route is marked with coloured strings and pins on a giant map. Close-up pictures of the target are shown. Details of the route are given. "Cloudy", the weather-man, forecasts the clouds and conditions over the target, and the Colonel summarizes the situation and points a few morals, e.g.: "Anything that heads towards you and looks like taking pictures with a flash-light—let him have it."

The ship was just queuing up to take off when a message came for me to get out. The tyre of the leading ship had a puncture, so it couldn't take off, and the Colonel, who was leading the group, was transferring to this aircraft, leaving no room for me. I clambered out. There was a high wind on the runway produced by the madly revolving airscrews of the ships queued up for take-off. It was difficult to stand up, especially when loaded with parachute, oxygen-mask, life-belt and odd clothing. I found myself and kit standing Chaplin-like beside the queue of bombers waiting to take off. Just then Major Beckett, the good-looking deputy Group Commander, drove up through the wind in a jeep and okayed the idea of my getting on the next ship but two. I got in just as it was moving off and sat with the waist-gunners while the ship threw itself along the take-off and up into the air. Then made my way forward and found myself enclosed in the bomb-bay, stuck between two iron frameworks loaded with bombs. The doors were shut on either side and I had a general sense of taking part in an Abbott and Costello chase.

But the new nose was roomier. It was more open. The ammunition had been used to furnish the place with more care. I seemed to have interrupted something. The navigator was reading the *News Chronicle*, and the bombardier a Penguin book. I was given a box of ammunition to sit on; unfortunately, it had no lid and was not fully loaded, so I was suspended.

Through my headphones I can hear the arrangements of getting the formations fixed. I can see more aircraft than yesterday, because this ship is further back in the formation. There are nine Fords immediately ahead, four out of the left-hand window and eighteen out of the right. Presently will come the problem of whether or not to spit out one's chewing-gum before donning the oxygen mask.

It is now 4.45 p.m. and am wearing mask; nothing has happened; nothing to do but watch the little red ball which bobs up and down between the gauge to show that the oxygen is working all right.

Sample conversation on the inter-phone.

"Ball gunner to navigator. Ball gunner to navigator. Over."

"Carry on, ball gunner."

"What's that ship out on the right?"

"Must be part of another formation."

"Tanks. I just wanted to know."

Pilot: "We are coming right in on the English Channel now."

The navigator and pilot keep saying numbers.

Just over Beachy Head. The ship is bumping about a little. The bombardier is having trouble with his 'chute; he cannot get it on. They are testing the guns, which make pleasantly little noise against the noise

of the 'plane. We are now over Dieppe. The navigator and bombardier have suddenly busied up. The compartment suddenly seems much too small and my presence quite unwarrantable. I am kneeling, which is very appropriate and most uncomfortable. Crouched sitting on my right heel I cannot see a thing, being diffident of getting in the way. I am trying to take a look, but whenever I get to the window there is nothing in sight. The folly of all this becomes more apparent minute by minute. I wish I had brought my flak under-pants. I cannot move forward without getting in the way, and I cannot move back because I am nearly at the end of my oxygen tube tether. Parts of my body feel very hot, parts very cold. Presently I find a way of half lying, which still further restricts the view but reduces intense muscular fatigue. The weather is wonderfully sunny. We have just passed a crippled fighter being escorted home by four others. The navigator and bombardier look like the Wright brothers leaning forward in this apparently frail glass case sprawling among the maps and ammunition.

We skirted Paris. I could just make out the Eiffel Tower. It was exciting to see it.

The formation out to our left was going through a heavy flak barrage; little bursts of dark brown smoke all in around them. One of their aircraft fell away, having been hit. Presently there were some little bursts in our formation. I tried not to care. The maddening thing was that the pilot didn't seem to make any effort to go any faster or dodge about. We just mooned drearily forward.

Dotted all over the sky were groups of aircraft, bombers, fighters, American, British, and some German. They all plunged purposefully along about their different business. It was like a sort of market day or a lot of people hurrying to work. I didn't get any particular sense of massed power; even the aircraft just ahead looked quite small and innocuous, though their guns were roaming across the sky. It seemed absurd to think of all the work and organization which had gone to bring each one of those groups to fly there that sunny afternoon.

I gave up trying to see out of the window, and after a while I became attuned to the circumstances with a sense of satisfaction which I felt must be punctured by something.

And no wonder I was beginning to feel serene. I found that we were back over England, having got to the target but again been unable to drop bombs because of thick clouds. I there and then determined that, come what may, I would be present at the dropping of at least one bomb on enemy-occupied territory. I felt that someone was trying to make a fool of me. The crew felt the same, though they were consoled to some degree by the fact that the excursion counted as one of their operational tour.

#### *Wednesday*

The weather was too bad for anything but training.

#### *Thursday*

Here we are again sitting in the nose of another aircraft, but with the same navigator and bombardier that I started with the first time. These ships vary quite a bit in design. The ammunition boxes are built differently. There is a minimum of room in this ship. The engines have just



"AS YOU HIT THE GROUND THERE IS A CONSIDERABLE SENSATION OF IMPACT ALL  
THROUGH THE BODY"



"THE EIGHTH JUMP WAS BY PLATOONS, THREE AIRCRAFT LOADS AT A TIME"

started; we are a bit late owing to something wrong with the bomb-bay doors. I remembered to bring along an air-cushion. Today we are supposed to go to an airfield by Saint Nazaire. As we start I bump my head sharply against a gun.

I seem to have been doing this for months. There is no sensation of excitement, although there has been during the day. I am not awfully comfortable, and have to crouch down to avoid being hit on the back of the head by this gun, and sit with my feet out of alignment. My two companions don't talk much. I write industriously in the hope that they will be deluded into thinking that I am making a significant record of this matter. The weather is not good at all, being cloudy. Another group of Forts has just passed by the window.

The navigator is using a pair of dividers on a map of the Brest area. The rear gunner has just come crawling up through the hatchway to borrow a blanket, having very injudiciously forgotten to bring the connecting plug for his heated suit. It is really wonderful up here. The sky is a lost-horizon blue. It doesn't seem likely one could come to any harm. I found I had not eaten my Mars bar from the previous time. I ate it. Too quickly. I am sure it is a mistake not to prolong one's pleasures. I am trying to remember what to do in the way of first aid if one of these men gets wounded.

4.10 p.m. Have just put on my oxygen mask. You get used to it very quickly, though you notice it when you move round, and you can only move in a very restricted range. To show my new confidence I have just put a stick of chewing-gum into my mouth, lifting my mask to do so.

Later. I have just found myself thinking how sad it would be if I were killed. Sudden picture of my family opening the little bag with my things in it sent back to them by the Americans. I wonder what they would do with the American cigarettes and the orange I picked up off the floor during this morning's lecture by an R.A.F. sergeant. Would they eat the orange, or keep it as a souvenir? I have just a faint feeling someone is squeezing my intestines. I suppose it is the elements of the bends that afflict people in high altitudes. I found myself wishing we could be shot down in a comfortable way, and have a comfortably exciting escape, but this mood is quite different from the ideas I had over France on Tuesday when we were passing through flak; the folly of it all was then uppermost. These young men are very reassuring to be with. There is no resolute determination; on the other hand, no frivolity; just deadpan. There are ships in front and on either side, but one doesn't seem to derive any support from being with so many. Each ship seems strictly on its own for the purpose of self-preservation. The bombardier has just put on his winter coat. There is some kind of draught somewhere, and 25,000 feet is no height for a draught. I have just asked where we are, and we are approaching the English coast. Shortly afterwards we passed by the Channel Islands.. They looked very small from our height.

Slight doubt by the pilot as to whether we are being led back to England. We have been turning to the right or Atlantic for some minutes.

Sure enough, we were going home again. Talk about sickening. Immediately the incentive evaporates you feel tired, bored and cold.

. . . . .

*Friday*

I was called at 2.15 a.m. by a blood brother of Humphrey Bogart. Briefing was at 2.30 a.m. We were going to the same target as Tuesday. Breakfast was quite something—an orange, cornflakes, bacon and two eggs.

Out in the darkness some of the ships had lights in their noses, which made them look more like insects than ever. There was about an hour and a half before take-off. You have a tremendous feeling of worthwhileness; the new day is not going to be wasted as far as you are concerned. The dawn did not break, it flowered into an anticlimax of coloured mists.

I am riding behind the pilots. They are conducting a testing dialogue. "Oil pressure coming up 4," says one. "Oil pressure coming up 4," says the other. Both pilots suddenly rub their faces with burnt cork. I ask and learn that this is to reduce the sun glare, which is very intense at high altitudes. The testing process continues as we queue up to go off. He throttles up each of the four engines in turn, announces, "No. 1 checked. O.K.," etc.

We are airborne at 6 a.m. The co-pilot calls out the speeds as we race along the runway. "Fifty, sixty, seventy"; at 130 we rise.

The top turret gun is just behind me. The gunner: "See them cracks in the windscreen? That's concussion from firing. That's about the sixth set of windows we had in."

The pilot suddenly reaches up over my right shoulder and fires a Vercy light. Down below the ground is shrouded in mist like a Mongolian ghost world. The turret gunner and I lean over the pilots' shoulders. Two faces decapitated by the high backs of their seats. Both monotonously chewing gum. Things happen, time passes, slower when you are standing up. There are some thirty dials; the only one I understand is a clock which is 2 hours 25 minutes slow. These Americans refer to light mist as fog.

I am standing with my feet apart, each on a narrow ledge, with a hatch below me. The turret gunner points out the door through which we entered. "Learn how to use that door. Pull the red handle, the door falls from you, get out head first; feet first you are liable to hit your head on the door with wind resistance." My stomach is playing me up a little. Standing makes you more conscious physically, so I sit down and read a chapter of Eric Ambler's *Cause for Alarm*. This 'plane is called the *Black Ghost*. The pilot has just fired another signal. Each time the turret gunner reloads the pistol.

Turret gunner: "That's a funny sector we're going. First time we lost five ships, then we went three times over and hardly see a thing. Then we have fighters and flak everywhere. Now today I don't know what we are going to have."

The ground is hazy, but the aircraft are sharply defined in the sunlight, as if each one had an individual coating. I can see six ships, four out ahead, one alongside, one behind. The propellers from this angle seem to lollop over lazily and irregularly. We are approaching a snow-like cloudbank. It is like crawling up a shore. Air speed is 150. The ships each rise and fall all the time, but it is not noticeable inside. The group ahead are just flying up a valley between two banks of cloud; there almost

seems to be a danger of crashing against the clouds. I don't know whether it is a tribute to Eric Ambler or cowardly escapism, but I keep wanting to read that book instead of concentrating on the situation. We are approaching the French coast. 'Chutes on. Also wearing flak helmets. The other day mine was too small, now I have one that is too big. The guns have been tested and the pilots have suddenly become more watchful. If I lean back at all the turret catches me in the back, and, when revolving, starts to drag me round, so I have to hang on in a sort of fly-like position to the back of the pilot's seat. Well, here is France. How the hell I can get out of all this paraphernalia if necessary I don't know. I suppose he will be firing the Verey light again. I feel nervy at the prospect of this mild explosion. One or two other things may explode, come to think of it. We are going over Dieppe. I can see a lot of our fighters, I am glad to say. I wish they would cuddle up a little closer. I am holding my flak helmet above my eyes like a man holding on to his hat in a high wind. I must look a B.F. standing here trying to write notes, hoping something will happen, and hoping it won't. Now, what's that phrase a variation of?

It is 8.30 a.m. and I am suddenly conscious of cold toes. So is the pilot apparently, he keeps on stamping his feet. We have started turning. If we don't drop bombs this time I shall resign. I write "Are we going home" on a piece of paper and hand it to the co-pilot, who writes "If we don't find this target we will get another."

Up above you can see fighter trails. There seems to be a dogfight going on. This approach is interminable. The thing just seems to go steadily forward with no sense of straining to get there and away. Just as I write that, flak starts up everywhere. It is much fiercer than the other day. Little black, pointed, flat toadstools dispersing into fantastic tree shapes. It jumps up all round like Jack-in-the-Boxes. The formation ahead of us is passing through a barrage. You can't hear anything except the normal roar of the 'plane. The guns have just started working for some reason. Their stuttering makes the ship shudder, but it is nothing like the alarming noise they make when you fire them on the ground. You cannot hear much except the noise of the 'plane; if you listen you seem to hear explosions like punctures, but it might be imaginary noises in the ear. The shadow of the turret guns keeps passing back and forth across the cockpit. I look out for fighters. We are now west of Paris. Apparently we have been cruising round Paris for quite a time. I can see the Eiffel Tower. Now we are in another flak barrage. They seem to fire a great number of rounds. My face is painful, as the mask is too tight; my feet are cold; I don't think we are going to drop the bloody bombs. I try to scratch my nose, but of course scratch the mask. I am getting pretty tired and fed up.

There are some enemy fighters out to the right. Three or four little specks. They don't seem capable of doing anybody any harm. I know it is silly, but you cannot seem to work up any strong feelings. Then the guns started; I could see tracer spouting from the nose, and I caught sight of an enemy fighter out in front. There seemed to be tracer pouring into it, but it didn't seem discouraged, it seemed to hang there rather uncertainly, and then little stabs of flame appeared as it fired at us. Then it dived off past the right window. Two others did the same thing. Somehow they were not particularly frightening, not so frightening as the flak,

because you are conscious of their being much smaller than you, and driven by someone in the same condition of being in a strange element, whereas the flak comes up directed at you by a lot of people with nothing else to do. You feel something in common with a man who is also in a contraption thousands of feet above the earth, but the men on the safe ground below are very definitely on the other side of the counter. At this point I rather naively inquired what had happened to the 'plane on our left. Apparently it had been shot down, but I had not noticed it. 'A few seconds later I saw a Fortress diving down on its own. You knew that inside it there were ten men faced with the immediate prospect of death, but this idea was oddly unimpressive; not nearly so fascinatingly horrible as, say, the sight of a man being marched off to jail.

Presently we turned and the formations broke up into a line, one 'plane behind the other, for the bombing run. They couldn't bomb in formation without bombing the aircraft flying below.

As each bomb drops a red light flashes on the panel in front of the pilot. Afterwards the formations rally as quickly as possible and make for home. Apart from a little flak and the pilot's heel becoming frostbitten we didn't have any more trouble.

We got back just after 11.30 a.m.

A few months later I went down to fly another mission from the same station. Yelvington, the "greenhorn" of the first occasion, had now flown some twenty missions and was one of the most experienced pilots. The whole place had developed tremendously; they were now able to send twice as many aircraft as before. Everything had multiplied, improved, accelerated and matured.

Owing to the unfavourable weather we were restricted to targets in Northern France, which the crews now regarded as a dreary little milk run, though when I first visited a Fortress field, little more than a year before, a mission of the same depth was considered quite an adequate height of daring.

Later in the same week I flew on an R.A.F. daylight operation over Northern France in a Mitchell medium bomber, which is much smaller and frailer than a Fortress, and even lacks the reassuring quality of the name "Fortress". Everything is smaller and vibrates more. On a medium bomber airfield there is none of the sense of drama associated with heavy bombers. The preparations and briefing are much more spontaneous and informal. The operations are shorter and I started on mine with the inescapable feeling that it was some kind of sporting event. A feeling possibly enhanced by a letter from the A.O.C. read out at the briefing, which had entreated the crews not to bomb any but military targets so that in years to come they would be able to look back and congratulate themselves on a good fight cleanly fought in accordance with the principles of international law. I found that the pleasure of taking part in such attractively clean and well-regulated fun almost disappeared on arrival at the French coast. In the Fortress my confidence grew, in the Mitchell it evaporated. And though six Fortresses had been lost and hardly a shot was fired against us in the Mitchells, I was much more anxious to get home in the Mitchell than I was in the Fortress. Perhaps it was something to do with my digestion.

## STAY WITH THE AMERICAN ARMY

I WAS SENT TO STAY WITH AN AMERICAN INFANTRY BATTALION, THE funny thing about going from one Army to another is the way you find exactly the same characters and behaviour in both.

I was told to report to an American Divisional Headquarters. This turned out to be an Army gymnasium. The whole place had been partitioned off and filled with trestle-table desks.

There seemed to be hundreds of people about, exuding that air of purposeful and significant activity which is an American gift.

The Lieutenant introduced me to a Captain, who introduced me to two Majors, who introduced me to a full Colonel. They all said they were happy to have me with them. I had never felt so well appreciated before.

It was now noon and the Captain was anxious to get to lunch, but apparently he couldn't go without the Major. The Major was busy on the 'phone. On his desk there was a book called *Shooting to Kill*. "Gosh, would I go for a book like that!" said the Lieutenant. There was also Hugo's *German Simplified* and a tommy-gun. When we finally went to lunch the Major brought his tommy-gun with him. "So long as we're in a theatre of war I'm carrying this around. So long as there's any danger of enemy attack," he said.

The officers' mess was a peace-time sergeants' mess. We went straight into the dining-room, which was crowded with something like 200 officers. The table appointments were nothing particular. Just a knife, fork and teaspoon. There were pots of tea up and down the table, plates of apples, plates of bread-and-butter.

For lunch there was a composite dish of liver, apple chips, raisins, mashed potatoes, dates and marrow (which seemed to be new to the Americans). This was followed by rice with raisins. No one drank any alcohol.

The thing that immediately strikes you is how everyone seems to know everyone else, and furthermore, seems pleased to.

Conversation centred on the girls situation. There had been a company of A.T.S. who apparently had made a considerable impression. There were also a considerable and growing number of regulations as to how long it was permissible to linger on the doorstep to say good night, etc.

"Would you like a wash up, Captain?" said the Captain. "Come along over to my quarters."

These were in some old peace-time married quarters, the usual little ugly, standardized, red-brick houses. The Captain, who was a tough, good-looking young man, shared a small room upstairs. His room-mate was lying on the bed when we arrived. He was very glad to know me. There was just room for two truckle beds and a table. For some reason the black-out was up. It consisted of an Army blanket with a faded orchid pinned in the middle of it. The table was littered with magazines, a few old letters, a copy of the American Army publication *Stars and Stripes*, and the contents of a bag which they had each been issued with by the Red Cross. It contained a pocket novel about the Lone Star

Ranger, a miniature chess and checkers board, a cake of soap and a sodium stick, a very good 'housewife' and several other things of the kind.

The walls of the room were liberally sprinkled with pictures of young women in various stages of bathing and undress; some movie stills, but mostly amateur photography. The Captain picked up the copy of *Stars and Stripes*, which contained a picture of six young women dressed in Hollywood harem dress and captioned, rather unkindly, 'The Six Virgins'. "Do I go for the one on the right," said the Captain.

They started discussing the bureaucratic and wicked inefficiency of the higher formation, that fine old Army pastime. The Lieutenant, who came from the higher formation, became rather cagy as the criticism strengthened. "Oh, we're kept very busy," he said. "I do a seven-day week—never stop."

We went back to the offices. There was then a delay. The Captain, who was supposed to conduct me, was also supposed to conduct a demonstration of fieldcraft and scouting for the General's benefit. I sat around, reading *Shooting to Kill*. But the demonstration was postponed and we started out for Regimental Headquarters (equivalent to our Brigade Headquarters).

Here there were more introductions and explanations, and finally I was escorted to Battalion Headquarters of the Battalion I was to be staying with. I was in the charge of the Battalion Intelligence Officer, a chunky, slow-speaking man in his thirties.

He took me to their mess, the ordinary red-brick, regular Army officers' mess. He showed me into his room, which I was to be using as he was going away for the week-end.

It was a bare room with an iron bedstead, table and chair and dressing-table. There was coal in the grate but no fire. Lieutenant Don Kellett hadn't unpacked much. Most of his things were still in a small steamer trunk and a hold-all. On the dressing-table there was an orange in a glass, on the table some empty Chesterfield cigarette tins, a pile of carefully preserved letters from home, a shaving-mirror, a torch, a small china dog, and an elaborate pair of sun-glasses. There was also a pile of receipts from wine merchants. Under the bed there were three pairs of Army boots and a pair of Wellingtons with buckle straps. On the mantelpiece there was a rifle.

After making sure that the arrangements suited me, the Lieutenant led the way into the ante-room. This again was very bare—a few tables and chairs and a bar rigged up by the window. There were two mess waiters sitting there polishing brass badges. "We sure are sorry, sir. Didn't know there'd be anyone," they said.

"That's all right. Just you carry right along," said the Lieutenant, but they moved out just the same. "Is Harry about?" said the Lieutenant.

"D'ja like me to go look for him, sir?"

"Yes. Tell him to come and open up. Sit down, Captain."

I asked how they found the quarters.

"They're fine," he said.

"What's so fine about them?"

"For the last two years we've been nomadic, mostly under canvas. We had to come all across the ocean to get a roof over our heads. Our

last post in the States before we started getting ready to come abroad we were in some tropical jungle in Florida."

This kind of country seemed like a park, so divided up and cared for. They didn't see how they could manœuvre without damaging crops. In the States it didn't matter what you damaged so long as you paid for it, there was no supply shortage problem to be reckoned with.

He told me the Battalion history.

In peace-time, when Companies were reduced to about 100 men and one officer, they were stationed at Governor's Island, a port which covers the entrance to New York Harbour. During the past year they had been doing landing exercises from transports off the coast. And from early September to December they had been on continuous manœuvres covering an area of two States. All this time they had lived in battle conditions, marching during the day, sleeping under canvas or rolled in a blanket at night, and eating from field kitchens. Sometimes the situation was declared to be tactically suspended for a week-end so they could clean up a bit and get a bath, but otherwise they kept right on at it.

During this story Harry had arrived and opened up the bar. Harry was a tough, barrel-chested, red-faced character. He was going to do things his way. That was obvious right away. If you were ready to treat Harry right, then everything would be fine. If you weren't, then what did you expect?

"What'll you take then?" said Harry to me. We each had an Army mug full of beer. The Lieutenant told me he used to work on the New York *Daily News*. Did I know John Walters of the English *Daily Mirror*? I said I had met him. "My desk in the *News* was right alongside his," said the Lieutenant. "Must look him up when I get to town. I am going to town tonight. Oh, boy!" I said that according to this morning's *Daily Mirror* John Walters was still in New York, so they wouldn't be meeting tonight.

I asked where the officers and men of the unit mostly came from. He reckoned that half the enlisted men and about fifteen per cent of the officers were peace-time regular soldiers, a very high percentage, this being a crack Division. The rest of the officers were mostly men who had qualified for commissions by taking a military course at college.

The Americans are much more sentimentally interested in a Division than we are. Their sentimental loyalty to the Division is almost as strong as ours to the Regiment. Another officer, a very large one, came in and had a mug of beer.

The Lieutenant decided it was time to take me down to meet the C.O. Incidentally the commanding officers of the three Battalions in this particular Regiment were Majors, though the normal rank of a Battalion commander is Lieutenant-Colonel. They had only been Majors for a few months. For quite a time they had commanded their Battalions as Captains. The Lieutenant spoke very enthusiastically of his C.O., who was in his early thirties and had been recommended for a decoration for efficiency. Their unit had been chosen to be the first combat unit to enter this country.

Battalion Headquarters was rather simpler than our Battalion Headquarters. They didn't seem to have so much to look after. There were just two trestle tables in the outer office and a very enviable portable

desk. Well, not very portable but very convenient; a heavy chest about three feet square with a lid which opened to show the inside partitioned into pigeon-holes and drawers. The Battalion sergeant-major sat at this desk and a young officer at the other. The sergeant-major didn't look much like our idea of a Battalion sergeant-major; too good-natured-looking, not regimental enough.

I was shown into the inner office to meet the C.O. and his second-in-command. Both seemed to be in their early thirties, and good screen types. Slim, but strongly built, well-weathered faces and intelligent-looking. Elegantly uniformed, and extremely anxious to help.

The next thing was to meet the Colonel. We walked over to Regimental Headquarters to find he had just gone out. The Adjutant introduced me to the regimental executive, equivalent to our Brigade-Major. He had a voice rather like Eugene Pallette. While we talked the rest of the office went on with their work. Internal problems are oddly alike everywhere. The same jobs produce the same characteristic attitude to life. For instance, one of the fundamentals of Army life is the extraordinary reluctance of the quartermaster to part with any of his stores. To a quartermaster stores are something to be indented for, but not used. A little man came in and asked the Adjutant for some buckets. The Adjutant called for the quartermaster-sergeant (supply sergeant or some such thing they call him): "Have you got any buckets?"

"Yessir."

"Have you given any out?"

He went into the international routine: "I've got 'em, sir, but if I turn loose everything I have I won't have anything." He was over-ruled.

There was then some discussion between the Adjutant and two sergeants employed in the office as to what time they could arrive at work. They said, they could either make up their bed and kit properly as required or they could get to the office punctually, but they couldn't do both. They suggested that someone else should be detailed to make their beds for them. This was turned down; the Major joined in to tell them they had to get themselves ready just like anyone else. That was all very well, they told him with spirit, but how were they to get any breakfast? It was finally decided that the solution was to put out an official order for them to buck the chow-line, i.e. go right to the head of the breakfast queue without waiting their turn. In the British Army sergeants have their own mess, run on the same lines as the officers, with mess waiters, etc. In the American Army not so. Higher rank means a better job but not a different caste.

The executive took me up on to the parade ground to see the formal ceremony of Retreat. On the way he told me that the Regiment had been robbed of its band before coming overseas. But, bless my soul, they had managed to improvise a drum and bugle band of about twenty men with a drum major. This was operating to one side of the field, with the men all waiting, mostly out of sight, to be marched on. The band started playing, with some very fancy technique. For instance, the buglers greeted any nodal point in the score by waving their instruments from side to side above their heads twice, and then revolving them twice

The men marched on in fours and formed into mass with about sixteen men to each rank. Their marching by our standards was very loose, though maybe none the worse for that. Also, this was the first time they had had this parade so formally since they got off the boat. Their drill, the executive explained to me, was a bit rusty. There wasn't so much shouting about getting their dressing, but the process went on just as long as it does with us.

After some military formalities of one kind and another they marched round in a circle behind the flag, preceded by the band, past the saluting base, where one of the Battalion Commanders stood taking the salute. The spectators all religiously salute the flag as it passes, just as we stand up for the national anthem after the theatre.

While the parade was going on I was presented to the Colonel, who arrived in a jeep. He was a sardonic and breezy character. He thought the parade wasn't bad considering how long they had been off it.

At the end of the parade there was a considerable process of dismissing the officers. In the British Army they shout 'Fall out the officers' and they all march forward and salute. But here they all paraded and marched forward in formation with the flag, and then marched back again.

There was then an informal conference of the Battalion Commanders who had all been watching. It was mostly on the subject of absence without leave. The C.O. I was staying with wanted to point out that one of his men who had been reported as absent without leave wasn't really so, having been hit on the head by a military policeman and in hospital ever since. The Colonel said that was all very well but what about the other man? The C.O. said that he wanted to emphasize that there was only one case, not two, so that the Battalion wouldn't compare unfavourably with the others. The Colonel pointed out that it still compared most unfavourably with the others who hadn't got any. The other two Commanders stood by, looking not exactly displeased by the turn of conversation.

The Colonel went on to discuss a visit he had paid to one of the cantons that morning. He was disappointed, to put it no stronger, at the number of men he had found enjoying a mid-morning siesta over a cup of tea. One of the Battalion Commanders said they were probably men on light duty. "It was light duty all right," said the Colonel. "I've never come across any lighter."

We walked back to the Regimental Headquarters, where the Adjutant said that there were two men waiting to be brought before the Colonel for overstaying their leave. The Colonel went into his room and the first man was sent in. Through the door came the Colonel's voice. The other man stood in the outer office looking extremely apprehensive. The Major glared at him. "Shave those sideburns off," he barked.

"Yes, sir," said the man unhappily.

"Have them off by seven o'clock and report with them off."

"Yes, sir."

Presently the second man was sent for. The odd thing to me was that they were brought before such a high officer as the Colonel (equivalent to our Brigadier) for over-staying leave a few hours, a thing which in our army would be dealt with by Battalion Commanders. And secondly

that, having been brought before such a high officer, there should be so little military prison atmosphere about the whole thing. I well recall that on the odd occasions when I was brought up for judicial attention on one small point or another the proceedings were prefaced by all manner of preliminary shouting and screaming at one, calculated to produce a properly chastened frame of mind.

I went back to the mess and settled down to work in my room. But after a bit I thought I heard signs of a meal being eaten, though it was only six o'clock. I looked out and found that they were having their evening meal.

The C.O. was waiting to take me in. We had a drink first and then went into the dining-room. There were about twenty-five officers, all in their twenties; a very lively-looking lot. We edged our way round to some reserved seats and the C.O. made a little speech: "Gentlemen, this is Captain Cotterell, a British officer, who is here to observe how we do things." Then he called out their names in turn and each one stood up to receive my suave 'howjewdo'. One of them came in late and the C.O. explained to him that I was to be with them for a few days. The newcomer looked at me delightedly and said: "Oh, boy, that'll be *swell*."

For dinner it was liver and mash, peas and a kind of Welsh rarebit on toast, all served on one plate. Also coffee served out of a monster washing-water jug. There was plenty of sugar, tins of condensed milk, butter and bread, up and down the table. But things were pretty down to earth compared with an English mess in this country. There were no saucers, no small plates, and you just had a knife, a fork and a dessert spoon to do the whole thing. They talked a lot and very boisterously, treating the C.O. with much less ceremony than we do.

He said how impressed he had been with the kind of service he had had from the batman and mess waiters when staying with an English Brigade. There was certainly none of this trained-seal nonsense about Harry, who kept slouching in and out, and finally stood in the doorway, regarding us with satyrine contempt, as if we were the patrons of a restaurant he was tired of owning.

I should emphasize in making all these cracks that the officer-men relationship was perfectly well defined and controlled, but by different standards.

The second-in-command asked me if I would like to come visiting another Regimental Headquarters, and then perhaps call on the American nurses.

It was only a few hundred yards down. Rather a bigger building. It was being used as a mess by three Battalions. A meeting of all the officers was being held in a big room to the right of the hall; a big room, but not big enough. Some of the less needle-keen were overflowing into the hall. It went on for about ten minutes and then they all poured out towards the bar, which was a service hatch in the wall set up behind some screens at the end of the hall. My companion had come to see another young Major, who happily bought us a drink. We went out on to the porch and talked about girls they had known or were knowing. After a couple more drinks I excused myself and came back to do some work. It still wasn't eight o'clock. Back in the mess, which they call the Club, they were playing poker. I went to my room and worked till about 10.15 p.m., then went to bed.

## STATUTORY RAPE AND FIELD SANITATION

NEXT DAY I LEFT THE BATTALION FOR TWO DAYS TO VISIT AN AMERICAN training centre where several courses were being held, including the first American Officer Cadet School in this country. This involved a cross-country journey. At one point I stopped to ask the way at a guard-house, which was a new red-brick one-storey building. Inside there was a military police corporal sitting at a desk, and another military policeman by the fire. It was a big room with two doors leading off it. One was open on to a large communal cell with eight plank beds, three of them made up with blankets. The afternoon winter sun was shining through the small high windows and a fat cat was asleep on one of the beds. It was so peaceful that I was in no hurry to be off, and sat down as invited.

"What do you think of the town here?" I asked.

"It's a graveyard with stoplights, Captain," said the corporal.

The man by the fire got up and started pulling down one of the tip-up beds arranged round the guardroom walls, then, looking through the window, he said, "Looks like we got a customer," and pushed the bed back against the wall. Two military police sergeants, one young and dapper, one gristled, came in with a young soldier wearing olive-green fatigue uniform. They handed the corporal the prisoner's consignment order and left almost at once. The corporal read the order and whistled, then handed it to the other policeman, who whistled in turn. I read it over his shoulder. The young man was being held pending investigation of a charge of statutory rape.

We all looked at him; even the policemen slightly moved out of their normal studied indifference. He was in his early twenties; a pleasant-looking, normal, by no means unintelligent youth. He put his personal kit which he had been carrying down on the table—the usual conglomeration, mostly carried in American cigar-boxes—and stood there. There was no particular sign of emotional upset, no apparent embarrassment, no sign of the conflict of remorse, indignation, fear and dejection which was presumably going on in his mind. He might have been waiting for something he had been sent to fetch. The corporal was looking for some papers in a cupboard behind his desk. The guardhouse cat walked sleepily out of the communal cell and rubbed herself against the prisoner's leg.

"Turn out your pockets," said the corporal. The young man turned out everything—handkerchief, money, wallet, package of cigarettes.

"Any tobacco?" he asked. It was the first thing he had said.

"Not more'n five a day," said the policeman.

When everything was out he held up his arms and the policeman frisked him, then carried his property, item by item, over to the corporal, who laboriously catalogued each one. They turned out his notecase, which had a picture of a girl inset in it. The policeman counted out six pounds and some American dollars. "Uh-huh, good old American dollars, eh?" said the corporal. "What's that?" He held up a coin.

"South African penny," said the prisoner.

The corporal laboriously wrote it down, and when he had finally listed it all, read it out to see if the prisoner agreed. Another policeman had come in in the meantime and now took the prisoner off to get his blankets. Presently he was led back and through the door to the solitary cells. The corporal was writing away all this time. "I'm gonna write 'hold for investigation and trial comma statutory rape'," he said.

"No, y'wanna put 'for statutory rape'," said one of the policemen.

"It says a comma here. Guess that's what I better put."

"Statutory rape—that's bad," said the policeman.

"First one we had here," said the corporal.

"Might git twenty years. I was in Panama; guy got twenty years. Raped the Major's wife."

"But that was tactless," said the corporal.

We settled down by the fire again. The corporal went on writing. The cat went back to the bed in the cell. A girl walked by the window and the corporal looked up. "Say, Mike, that's the one, ain't it?" he said. The other man looked up interestedly. "Yeah, that's my friend."

"She coming to the dance?"

"On a chain, Corporal, on a chain."

I reported to the post headquarters—a bungalow brick building, housing a whole network of offices. The Adjutant was baldish and benevolent, with glasses and cigar. He referred me to the executive officer—Major Veasey—who was in his middle thirties and had his office plastered with training charts, and a graph co-relating the hours of training with the hours of daylight. He told me that the present course consisted of seventy-six cadets who worked nine hours a day, six days a week, for a twelve-week course, of which this was the seventh. He took me across to a hangar-like building filled with trestle tables, at each of which two of the students were sitting, their rifles and webbing equipment laid out uniformly on the table in front of them. Each man had a shoulder flash with the letters 'O.C.S.'

Out front, one of the students was demonstrating the use of anti-gas clothing with a human model who was dressed in the whole anti-gas paraphernalia. The speaker was very well set up and confident-voiced:

"Any questions?" he ended.

One of the students got to his feet.

"Mr. Neville, will you explain the use of eye-shields?"

"Eye-shields are now G.I.," said Mr. Neville, still confident. "We didn't use them back home, but since we have been over here we have taken up eye-shields. They are worn like goggles and used mostly for protection against aeroplane spray. One thing to remember: directly they become contaminated, destroy them. You have to be very careful not just to throw them about where someone else is liable to pick them up and become contaminated."

A grey-haired Major stood up in the far corner and said: "Mr. Lewis, what do you think of Mr. Neville's talk?"

"I thought it was very good, sir," said Mr. Lewis. "He evidently knew his subject back and forth, and, personally, I learned a lot."

"Mr. Neville, how would you improve the talk if you were to give it over again?"

"To my mind, I was trying to get over too much in five minutes, sir," said Mr. Neville.

"Mr. Lewis, how do you think he could have covered more ground in the same allowance of time?" said the Major. Mr. Lewis said he didn't know, and the Major went on:

"When you first started the demonstration you realized that it was dull and you started talking fast. Don't let there be any dull spaces. Don't *try* to convince—either you are going to or you're not!"

"How was I trying, sir?" said Mr. Neville.

"You said you were trying. Now what sort of class was your talk addressed to?"

"Well, not loopies, sir. I figured they knew something about the subject."

"Just you watch the rear row—see it isn't left out, Mr. Neville."

"I realized that mistake, sir."

"A lot of us back here have seen a dozen demonstrations this afternoon and not really seen any!"

"I asked if they could see it, sir. No one said No," said Mr. Neville strongly.

"You certainly did a very good job," said the Major. "Mr. Wilson, you're up."

Mr. Wilson was also big and broad and confident. "My topic is Field Sanitation—a very important subject in the Army. There are three main places to consider this subject." He snatched a sheet of newspaper off the wall where it had been hiding a poster, to which he now pointed. "First of all, there is the field latrine—a very important item—in fact we can't get along without it. (Laughter.) It should be at least 100 yards behind the kitchen, downwind and on a low level. There should be, at all times, accommodation for eight per cent of your command. There is a lot more I could tell you about the latrines but I have not time.

"Now for the kitchen—but don't be afraid I'm going from the latrines to the kitchen without washing my hands. Cooks must have clean hands and feet. Their utensils must be washed in plenty of soap and suds. The water for washing men's kit should be approximately seventy-five feet in the rear of the kitchen. There should be three cans, one soapy, one not so soapy, and one can of clean water for rinsing. That is about all I have to say. Are there any questions?"

The Major got up again. "Mr. Allen, what did you think of that?"

"I thought it was very well done, sir," said Mr. Allen. "He certainly knew his subject from end to end. He was carrying a torch for it, so to speak."

"But how would you improve it, Mr. Allen?"

"I think his voice was pitched a little higher than usual. There was a tinge of oratory."

"Once in a while he got to rushing away. We must be slow and concise," said the Major.

"I realize that, sir," said Mr. Wilson.

"We must move around a bit. When we are making an oration, then we stand still, but for purposes of information demonstration we want to move around a bit. It gives that little extra informality. But you did an excellent job, Mr. Wilson. Mr. Teacher, you're up."

Mr. Teacher said that the attention paid by officers to the subject he was about to discuss would decide whether or not a lot of mother's sons were to return home. His subject was motor maintenance, and the neglect of it was a sad story. He went on to catalogue the points to be borne in mind.

"Mr. John, what did you think of that?"

"There was no question of his enthusiasm, sir. I thought he used that pointer a little to excess. A little too domineering. I think he lectured too much."

"Anyone got any other point?" said the Major.

"Wasn't it wrong of him to say 'gitting' instead of 'getting'?"

"It certainly was; we have to watch these little points of grammar, said the Major. "Get the idea? Just a little thing, but it adds up."

A student rose to his feet and said: "I do think he deserves credit for the atmosphere of suspense created at the start. He spoke for thirty seconds without mentioning his subject."

"Yes, he did a good job, Mr. Bernettski. . . ."

Later there was an evening scheme which started at 7.30. The class sat in one corner of a field across which the demonstrating squad was spread at fifty-yard intervals. The demonstrators took it in turns to cough, count up to four, light cigarettes, shine torches and rattle their equipment, to see how the sounds sounded at different distances.

The squad then retired to the other side of the field, to advance in open formation as near the students as possible without being observed. At that point an aircraft flying overhead dropped a flare, which perfectly lit up the whole field, so that the exercise lost rather a lot of its value.

At 8 a.m. next morning there was a drill parade on the square with the Colonel watching. I stood by one platoon who were being taken by one of the demonstrators.

"Raise your voice, Mr. Bartholomew," said the instructor. "A little more yet."

"Present arms."

Students (shouting): "One."

Instructor: "Mr. Wilson, don't drop your head, keep it up."

"Port arms."

"Mr. Hildebrant, hold your piece a little closer to the body. Let's get this just right."

"At ease."

"Carry that left foot twelve inches to the left. Now glance down a minute. Look at your feet."

The Colonel signalled the instructor from the middle of the square where he was standing.

"Coming, sir," shouted the instructor. "Mr. Mandy, take charge of the platoon. Continue with the manual of arms."

"I bet the Old Man's giving him hell because he was taking the squad instead of having the students do it," said Major Veasey.

And sure enough, when the instructor came back he said:

"Squad leaders take charge of your squads, and don't be afraid to sound off at them."

The platoon split up into three squads, each under a cadet, and marched about the square shouting "One, Two, Three, Four," to help keep in step.

Later I was taken round the students' barrack rooms. They were extremely well kept. Kit was laid out with rigid uniformity. I went round with Captain Michl, who was looking for things out of place. One man had his mirror hanging inside the door instead of on the locker shelf. Captain Michl took his number. Another man had his knife and fork out in his locker, instead of packed away. Another man had his cup out of place.

"The only way we can teach them is to keep after them," said the Captain.

"I see you have the neck-ties on this rack now," said the Major.

"Yes, sir, we had that out yesterday," said the Captain.

"You're going to correct that on the instruction sheet?" asked the Major.

"Yes, Major, but we have to go about it diplomatically."

"Yes, I know," said the Major.

In the wash-room the wash-basin plugs had to be laid out each in the same uniform way.

The Captain kept a book where penalties were entered against each man's name. Some men had five or six—mostly of the same kind. Thus a man who was awarded a penalty for having dust under his bed once, was awarded three in a row, each progressively stiffer, for the same offence.

Penalties varied. A dirty bayonet rated one demerit, a rusty bayonet five. Unpressed trousers two demerits, torn trousers three. It cost four demerits to have unauthorized articles in your locker, but only three to have them on top of the locker. It cost five demerits to drop your rifle, or be late for parade, and ten to be absent from a parade, but fifteen for having a rifle with a rusty chamber or bore.

After this I travelled back to the Infantry Battalion.

## 35

## WHAT TIME HAVE YOU?

I WAS CONSCIOUS OF PEOPLE COMING AND GOING OUTSIDE FOR SOME TIME before the man put his head in the door. He wore a tin hat and said quite simply: "Time to get up, sir." There would have been no reason to doubt him but for my watch, which said five to 6 a.m. However, for the reputation of the British Army, I jumped sharply out of bed and pulled down the black-out. Peering eagerly through the daylight, I was surprised and fortified to see several of the officers, not merely going out to inspect their men but returning from having done so. Appreciating that there was no time to lose, I made for the bathroom and met the Major, who had obviously been out and about for hours.

He offered to show me around after breakfast. He would just go up and shave and be right with me. I hung about the porch waiting for him and talking to the C.O., who was charmingly anxious to help. He suggested I should talk to Sergeant Steele, who had been over here in the last war with the same Company. He would arrange it for me.

It was a drizzling morning. The Major and I walked down to the

orderly room, where the C.O. was already at his desk. He worked with deliberate concentration and judicial calm and, for that matter, quiet dignity. The second-in-command had a slightly more dashing approach to the situation, definitely the glamour boy of the outfit.

A young corporal, subsequently identified as the personnel clerk, came bustling in. "I have some papers for you to sign and I'm in a hurry, sir," he said undiffidently.

While the Major launched out into the conventional expressions of resentment against the volume of clerical work one was expected to do I studied the standard operating procedure for immobilizing prisoners in the field. Belts and braces should be removed, trouser-buttons cut off, and when immobilizing for a period shoes should be removed. I turned to the monthly report on venereal disease, which, by American military law, must be published once a month. In the whole Regiment of several thousand men there was one case. I enquired the duties of the Battalion police and prison officer, whose name I heard mentioned. This is a rather thankless job, often given to someone who has got himself in bad with the authorities, and consists mostly of seeing that all the fatigues and dirty work get done.

"I'll take you over to the men's quarters, watch them cleaning up for the Saturday inspection," said the Major. Half a dozen men were working their way along the path outside Battalion Headquarters, picking up matches and cigarette ends. There was a great deal of saluting as we went along, even more than in similar circumstances in a British camp.

The men were housed in two-storey barrack buildings with balconies running along the length. Each platoon shared two barrack rooms and a communal wash-house. There were two parallel lines of buildings, with the cook-house and other miscellaneous buildings in between. The whole area was swarming with men doing various fatigue jobs of getting ready for inspection, sweeping, polishing, picking things up. We went into one of the rooms. "Tenshun," shouted a sergeant. "Rest," shouted the Major. "This is an English officer come to see what you live like. Carry on with your work."

For crack troops some of them seemed very small, but they all looked tough and wiry. I took a close look at their weapons.

The Garand rifle weighs nine pounds, about the same as ours, but it feels heavier, not so well balanced. The little carbine which officers and some of the others carry is a wonderful little thing; directly you get it in your hands you want to blaze away. And if any weapon makes me feel like doing that it must be pretty provocative. The American platoon has a tremendous fire-power. "We figure they can't get us out once we get over there," said the Major. "The only problem, of course, is keeping up the ammunition supply."

Just by the door there was a carrot-headed little man sitting on his bed cleaning his rifle. The Major looked down at him delightedly. "How you, Chuck?" he asked.

"Mighty fine again now, suh."

"Mighty fine to see you," said the Major.

"He's a good boy, that; fine soldier," he said as we walked along. We looked into one of the Company store-rooms, where they showed me one of the three field kitchens carried by each Company. These are about as



MORNING AFTER. WITH THE AIR CREW AND GROUND CREW OF T FOR TOMMY



big as a fair-sized kitchen oven, and really look as if you could get some cooking done with them. They burn petrol or, if necessary, wood, and can cook for sixty men. The young officer showing it to me was very enthusiastic. "See, you can put the fire unit up if you want to use the griddle," he said. Passing quickly from the sublime to the ghastly he showed me the trench-knife carried by men whose rifles don't carry a bayonet. It has individual finger-stalls and a pointed six-inch blade. "The rubber tyre has certainly come to stay," I said.

We passed on to the regimental dispensary. Some old cavalry stables had been turned into a very presentable little hospital, rebuilt and departmentalized. You walked in the door and there was the waiting-room to your right and the receptionist's room to your left. There were some patients hobbling and suffering their way through with the same air of infinite and necessary patience which characterizes our own sick parades. There was a gangway down the middle of the stable with screened-off sections on each side. Each section had a neat little wooden painted sign outside it: 'General Medical', 'Orthopaedic', 'Surgical', 'Prophylaxis', etc.

Through an undoorred doorway at the end was the ward. There were six men in bed, two of them reading, two asleep and the other two staring gloomily into space.

We passed through to the dental department. There were two chairs, of strictly utilitarian build, like the skeleton of an ordinary dental chair. Between them there was a tray of instruments supported on stays based in a travelling chest. The outfit of forceps and prodders was not very extensive; not so extensive as they brought in the last war, they told me. There was also one of the old-fashioned upright foot-drills. The whole outfit, including the chairs and foot-drill, could be folded up into the one travelling chest.

I asked the doctor whether they had had much trouble after the journey across. The one thing apparently was persistent colds and sinus trouble, which couldn't be got rid of, and often led to complications. "It's so much damper over here," he said. We were both standing outside in pouring rain at the time. There hadn't been much trouble from the change of diet, partly, of course, because every possible precaution had been taken to reduce the change as much as possible. But he was afraid that teeth would decay over here; they were doing everything they could to hold up the calcium content of the diet, but it was pretty difficult.

The Major looked at his watch. "What time have you?" he asked me.

"I have a quarter of nine," I replied adaptably.

"Still a bit of time before the inspection. What would you like to see?" he said.

We went to see the cookhouse. The cook sergeant, like all cook sergeants, had a long and circumstantial story of difficulties bravely borne. For one thing he was cooking for a thousand men on a kitchen designed for about half that number. But the main difficulty was that the kitchen had been designed to cater for the British ideas of how to prepare food. "All you can do is boil the hell out of it," complained the sergeant. "Dere ain't no oven, you cain't do anything delicate, no space for roasts and bakes." He opened a lid to reveal a sodden boiling

mass of our national food, the cabbage. He looked at it distastefully and slammed the lid down. "I cain't bear even looking at it," he said. He showed me his French fried cutter. You put a potato in it and it comes out chips.

The Major told me that the cooks did twenty-four hours on and twenty-four hours off. This sounds wonderful by our standards, but on the other hand they have three meals a day to prepare instead of two and a small one. The turn of duty is normally from noon to noon. On their days off, said the Major, they lie around or get drunk. Their room was normally called the Boars' Nest, because it was supposed to be always the dirtiest.

It was now time for the inspection. Apparently there was to have been some sort of outdoor parade, but as it was raining steadily they just concentrated on the room inspection. I followed the C.O. round into each platoon room. They were, of course, all the same. The men stood to attention by their beds. They slept in double-decker beds crowded close together, and with a table down the middle of the room. There was hardly room for the inspecting procession. We had to file into the room and then come out in reverse.

First there was the C.O. and the platoon-commander whose platoon was being inspected, then myself, the second-in-command, the Company Commander, and the platoon sergeant. The C.O. paused before an N.C.O. "Are they all happy men?" he asked.

"I don't know about that."

"Why aren't they all happy men then?"

"They figured on getting the week-end, and then they're restricted."

"Now we don't like people who gripe, do we?"

"No, sir."

The room was very well turned out. He stopped a minute with the sergeant and said: "That's a very good room, Sergeant, but from you I expect a very good room."

We stopped in the wash-place. "Very clean, Sergeant. Any trouble keeping this wash-place clean?"

"Cain't get any mops, sir."

"No mops?"

"Cain't get any rag mops, only string mops."

"I'll follow that up, Sergeant."

In each room he stopped before one or two men and asked them how much service they had, what their job was, did they command anything, did they want to get at the Germans. What weapon did they have, what did they think of it, had they fired it, what had they scored. "Anything you don't like around here?" he said to one man.

"Food ain't too good."

"What's the matter with it?"

"Cabbage is the matter with it."

"What d'you want, then?"

"Why, I'd like some more steak, sir."

"You better go catch yourself a German, then."

"That's pretty fancy, that moustache you're growing," he said to another man. "How many Germans you going to catch with it?"

"Sure you're kidding," the man said.

"Are you itching to get at the Hun?" he asked another man.

"Yessir."

"How many Germans you going to take back?"

"About a few, I guess."

But though they talk so tough they are just as nervous of the C.O. as men are in the British Army.

"Have you got a squad, corporal?"

"No, sir. Second-in-command."

"Is it a good squad?"

"It's the best one."

"How many good shots in it?"

"They're all good shots."

Afterwards I went up to the mess and worked in my room. Lunch was at noon. The same kind of composite dish and odd mixtures of apricot jam and sultana cake and fresh lettuce. They were all discussing where to go for the week-end. Nearly the whole Battalion had the week-end off. Two special trains were being run. But one Company had to stay as Duty Company for the whole Regiment. It was the Company which had a man absent without leave. He must have been fairly popular one way and another by the time he returned. After lunch I went down to the orderly room and worked. I had a nice long talk with Sergeant B——, a report on which now follows.

## 36

## CAREER OF A SERGEANT

SERGEANT ARTHUR B—— WAS TWENTY-THREE, SMALL AND WIRY, QUICK, alert and friendly. Determined to be intelligently interested in everything. Spectacularly keen on the job. He had been in the Army four years. He was at school in East Side, New York, until he was seventeen. He wanted to be a brain specialist and was studying to go to college. "I hated to see people walking round with brain diseases and that when they can be so easily cured." But he was unable to take up a four years' scholarship. He had a 140 i.q. and a ninety-nine per cent average in mathematics, science and chemistry, but his father didn't want him to take it up. So he became a stenographer in a printing company and went one day a week to a vocational school to study printing. He was the youngest of a family of fourteen, seven of each, nine living.

He couldn't get along with his father, and he knew if he went in the Army he would be free, so he joined the Army. "Something I'll never regret. Ninety-nine per cent of the time you're among a bunch of men, anyway. You're taught to be more or less competent, responsible." He was stationed all over the States at distances from home ranging between twenty minutes and 1400 miles.

He was now a buck sergeant. That is to say he led one of three squads in a platoon. He wore five firing medals on his chest, suspended by two chains. He was an expert rifleman (scored 198 out of possible 220). Expert with the bayonet (eight direct hits at a certain spot the size of a

man's heart in eight dummies spread out over 100 yards). Expert in the hand grenade (scoring hits at twenty-five and thirty-five yards and through dummy windows). Expert machine-gunner (scored 322 out of possible 350). Expert with the pistol (170 out of possible 200).

We went through his timetable for yesterday. He gets up at six. He sleeps with his squad—"I wouldn't want to sleep anywhere else," he said fervently. He looks round at them and says: "All right, git out of bed. Come on. Hit the floor." If anyone doesn't co-operate he pulls the blankets off. "Once in a while I get mad."

They have to be completely dressed by 6.15 a.m. in the particular kind of uniform which has been detailed the night before for the day's work. If greatcoats have been detailed, greatcoats they wear. Most of them wash face and hands and comb their hair. Most of them have shaved the night before, probably before they went out for the evening.

At 6.15 the reveille formation, which is simply to take absentee reports. It lasts about five minutes. Beds are then made. They make up the bed with one blanket and fold the other two blankets in triplicate under the pillow (with no loose edges showing, mark you).

Sergeant has to line up with the others. He spends most of his spare time with a private in another squad. They were privates and one-strippers together. "We'd have been non-coms together but he's the hell-bent-for-leather type, don't give a damn, so he's just messed up." This detail apropos of the fact that Sergeant prefers to line up with his men than to have a sergeants' mess. They have just set up a mess for staff, technical and master sergeants, but a lot of them don't use it, prefer to eat with the men.

"You might have a bit more comfort in a sergeants' mess but you wouldn't have all your friends around you." Sometimes there is a table set aside for N.C.O.s, but he only sits there when there are no seats left.

They queued up at the cookhouse, carrying a mess-tin which divides into two parts like a shallow saucepan and its lid. For breakfast usually a slice or two of bacon and baked or fried potatoes, some kind of cereal, bread-and-butter, and sometimes jam and coffee. Sometimes fruit.

After breakfast, until 7.30 a.m., they cleaned out the barrack-room.

Then they did close-order drill for an hour and a half, with a ten-minute break halfway. Everyone took the squad for a few minutes. "They all like to get a chance at it themselves. You give some of them that squad and it tears your hair, getting mixed up with other squads."

At nine they came back to the barracks, got out their light packs and gas masks and the Company marched two miles to a training field. They then learned that the day was to be devoted to squad problems. Over in the States they were training as an army, over here they were right back to training as a squad. "They used to take you and say how would you go over that area, and you'd say 'creep and crawl'. Then you'd walk the twenty yards and decide what you were going to do from there. But over here when they say creep and crawl we have to do just that, creep and crawl instead of simulating."

Everyone was much readier to play over here. "They realize that either you learn it now, or else."

Sergeant's squad was sent out as a reconnaissance patrol, to reconnoitre a section of the woods. Certain objects had been placed to

represent machine-guns, etc. The job was to bring back information as to what was there, etc.

"Due to the negligence of my scouts we walked into a machine-gun," said sergeant sadly.

They practised taking advantage of cover until 11.30 a.m., then they marched back to lunch.

They started working again at 1 p.m. Their platoon gave a demonstration to the rest of the Company on making use of cover. The other platoon had to advance across the area and see if they could detect the hidden men.

The rest of the afternoon was spent in getting ready for the Saturday inspection. Cleaning rifles, pressing clothes, shining shoes.

At 4.30 p.m. Retreat formation, the formal parade where the band plays. This was over by shortly after 5 p.m.

The Company was restricted to regimental area for the evening. At 6 p.m. sergeant had a beef stew, rice pudding, bread-and-butter, jam and tea. Then he went to see 'Aloma of the South Seas' with two of his squad and three others. Four privates, one corporal, and himself.

Favourite spare time hobby is gambling—"If they told me I couldn't gamble I'd quit. In the States you play poker and if you raise a man twenty dollars you think it's a lot; here I've seen them raise a man twenty pounds without winking. They haven't found out about the difference between pounds and dollars, some of them."

Several week-ends ago he had been to London. They got off the train and walked up to Trafalgar Square, where they met two girls. They went dancing and took the girls home about eleven. They slept most of the morning and met the girls again next afternoon and went dancing at Covent Garden. The girls worked in a chocolate-packing firm.

Next week-end he came up again and went straight to the girl's house. Meantime she went to meet him at the station. She waited until 6 p.m. "Was she burned up when she got back."

\* \* \*

I worked all through the afternoon until 6 p.m., which was dinner-time. There was no one about the orderly room except the C.O., who came in and sat in his office reading training manuals.

I had a drink with him before dinner. Harry leaned on the counter smoking a cigarette and listening to what we had to say. The C.O. was telling me his ideas on how to win the war. He was not in favour of going into France, which he regarded as a difficult and thankless task. He favoured a landing in Norway, and go on to attack the heart of Germany from there. "If you go across to France, where are you?" he drawled.

"That's true," I said.

"But if you get to Norway, well, then, you are some place," he said.

"You certainly are," I said. "But can you get back?"

"You know I have officers' meetings, at which I tell them all my ideas about strategy and what's likely to happen next. And when I was fresh out of staff school, why, I thought I had it all figured out pretty pat. But you have access to many facts I don't, and I've been thinking—that is to say I was wondering—whether you wouldn't like to come on down to one of our meetings and tell us what you figure is likely to happen, how things are going to develop."

"I'd love to, sir," I said. "But of course I'd like to have pretty good warning to give me time to marshal my ideas." Approximately a lifetime.

After dinner I went back to the old drawing-board, and about nine o'clock a sardonic young man came in and sat down at the other table. Another officer came in to report that his Company had attended to the black-out.

"Oh-oh, that's F Company again," said the first one. "Two few or too late."

"So we haven't got a 'phone," said the second one. "Either it's important to us and we send a messenger, or it's unimportant so we forget it. That's the way I like it."

They started ringing the other Companies to get their reports, a process which took some little time. Two other officers came in, one the officer of the day, and they all started reminiscing.

Here are some jumbled extracts I took down:

"We were sitting around just kidding along and she said, 'Why don't you never take me to a decent night club?' So we said, 'We'll take you along and buy you all the liquor you can drink if you put up the gas.' . . . She was never out of Florida till I took her. . . . I never thought people lived in Florida, I thought they only went there. . . . I never knew how we got home that night. . . . Don was playing the piano and you kept singing. . . . How would you like a double shot of bacardi and a bottle of coke and some cracked ice? . . . That was the worst night I ever had; I just got to the tent and passed right out."

"We really got stinko. Don takes it easy. So we wind up at a club, so we got thrown out. So we went on to this place out in the country, and there was an English Captain sitting with an American girl, and she and Don got looking at one another. And presently Don goes over and sits down with them. Well, that's all right, 'cause the Captain's pretty plastered, but when Don puts his arms round the girl and kisses her the Captain gets pretty mad, see. He wants to know what the hell about it. So Don says that he was engaged to this girl back in the States, and the Captain takes it. 'Oh, I'm sorry,' he says. 'I should have known there was something special between you.' We came back about four, guiding by the old church spire."

The conversation switched via the second front to the post-war world. "It's sure going to be a sorry world when it's all over," said one. "I'm going to buy me a farm." It went on from there to snakes in Florida, where apparently there are far too many snakes, and where one of them (one of the officers, not one of the snakes) took a taxi to a place called the Beach Hotel, and having no money to pay the fare, borrowed a nickel from the driver and won four dollars with it on a fruit machine.

## QUIT HORSING AROUND AND POLICE UP

**SUNDAY**—AFTER BREAKFAST I WENT INTO THE CLUB-ROOM. THERE WAS A notice on the wall outside: "Officers are reminded to line up squaws for Tuesday evening beer party 7 p.m., eats at 10 p.m."

Harry the bar-keep was pottering about the club-room. The black-outs were still up, which made it look pretty sordid to come into from the daylight. There were cigarette ends all over the floor and dirty glasses and mugs on the tables. Harry leaned on the bar shuffling an old pack of cards, trying to make up his mind to start cleaning the place. He sprang at the opportunity to talk to me instead.

He told me he had worked for a lead company, which had paid him fifteen pounds a week. He showed me the counterfoil of one of the cheques they sent him every six months. It was for 386 dollars.

One of the other mess waiters, who didn't look more than twenty, came in and said he had seen the two girls he and Harry had been out with the other night.

"You're getting to be quite a big boy," said Harry. "Next thing we know you'll be shaving."

The young man didn't think this very funny.

"Quit horsing around and police up," he said.

"Well, fancy that," said Harry.

"Git your laundry list done," pursued the young man, and went off. Frankie, the man who cleaned my buttons the first morning I was there, came in, raised one of the black-outs and peered into the sunshine.

"Women in here last night?" he asked.

"Yeah, three."

"Nimbo have one?"

"He had 'em all."

They both laughed. "He gits more women," said Frankie.

"He's moider," said Harry.

"Well, we got to go to work," said Frankie, and made a start by putting on the gramophone. A swing tune called the 'Jersey Bounce', which had been played so many times it was rather worn.

The mess staff consisted of a sergeant, two cooks, three strikers (bat-men) and Harry the bar-keep. There were also two men detailed every day for fatigues.

The morning I spent working down at the orderly room. A perfectly wonderful little man came in called Willie Rabinowitz. Just like a barrel to look at, perpetually grinning and very tough-looking. He talked exactly like a gangster on the films. I asked him to sit down and write the story of his life. "Sure ting, Capitain," he said, sat down and started writing right away, with laborious fluency. "Just a minute, Capitain," he said after a few minutes. "Chest lemme read you how far I gone. I think you're gonna like it."

And here it is:

"WHAT I DID BEFORE I JOINED THE ARMY.

*"By Pfc Willie Rabinowitz.*

"I was born in Warsaw on June 22, 1921, and I came to America in the year 1929.

"At the age of eight I started public school and I graduated at the age of twelve. Then I went to vocational school, something where a person

learned what he wants to be—airplane mechanic, radio operator, machinest and those things. Most of my life I lived in the city of New York, in the Burgh of Brooklyn. We were a family of six. My mother, father and my three brothers. It was not a very large house we all lived in but we were all happy. My father's trade is a costum tailor; my mother and father were both born in Russia and my brother in Poland. One of my brothers is a post office clark and two of us arc in the army and one works in the Merchant Marines."

An officer came in. "Hullo, Willie, what's cooking?"

"You tell me, Lootenant, I'm writing my biography."

"That's gonna be censored, Willie."

"Oh no, it ain't, Lootenant; you try and see. Say, I'll tell you something for your own good—de old men's on de war-pat."

"When was that?"

"Dis morning."

"What about?"

"Everything. I'm jest tipping you. He only has to hear your name and he jumps right up. He don't like you any liddle bit," laughed Willie, tickled to death. He went on with his writing.

Another young officer came in and made a 'phone call. "Can I speak to Miss Deer?" he said.

Willie turned to me with a pained look on his face. "Miss Deer, hoddyyuh like dat?" he said to me. "All right, Lootenant, I know how it is. You don't have to tell me."

The Lientenant went on talking. "No, I'm not a good liar, I'm an awful bad liar," he said.

"For heaven's sake," pleaded Willie without looking up.

The Lieutenant finished his 'phone call and went out. Willie looked up. "I'm gonna show you a liddle bit more; I think you're gonna like it," he said.

"I first worked in a large licquor concern where I used to take inventory and check in all company stock. I would have to be at work at 8.00 a.m. in the morning. I would have to get up at 6.45 a.m., have a hurry breckfast which consisted of bacon and eggs, toast, butter and coffee, and then hurry like hell to make the train.

"I did not stay on that job very long. I tried to get another job. So I landed a job as a bell boy. I traveled on the ship the S.S. *Manhattan*. We were in Rome, Tokyo, India, England and South America. Then in the middle of 1940 I quit the sea. On the money I made at sea I had a good time. I went to Florida to Miami Beach. We went swimming everyday, long motor trips, some nice looking gals where they are very easy to get.

"Then in Jan. 7, 1942, I joined the army. They first give you a very stiff medical examination and then they sware you in. I was very happy to get in because I wanted to protest which our fore fathers fought for. Live, Liberty and the pursuit of happyness. The first thing they did was to outfit you with a uniform. Then your army life began. We got up at 6.00 a.m. was first call at 6.30 a.m. We had pancakes, milk, flake coffee and out 7.25 we went to drill we had P.T. close order drill, like bayonet

drill. At 11.30 we had roll-call at 12.00 noon we at dinner which consisted of roast beef, potatoes, gravy, vegetables, coffee and pie. Then we went to drill at 1.00 p.m. We had problems on how to attack an enemy on all sides that lasted till 4.30 p.m. At 5.00 we stood retreat. After that we had supper which consisted of meat loaf, potatoes, gravy, coffee, bread and butter.

"After supper we went to the movies, had some icecream soda, sat around playing cards, visited people. That what an army life consists of. Now that we are in England we all hope that the war will end very soon and have peace again so we can all settle down to a nice quite life again and peace for ever after."

Lunch at noon. Afterwards the C.O. asked me to come into his office and hear about a telephone battle he was arranging. In a telephone battle you get two teams of officers to represent the enemies.

Afterwards I went for a good long walk. It was mighty fine, as the C.O. would have said, sitting up on the hills behind the barracks. I walked for an hour and came back in time for dinner at 5.30 p.m. Miss Deer, the lady who had been telephoned, had come over for the afternoon, and was having dinner.

The C.O. and I were presently left eating together.

He asked me if I would like to come out on a problem with them next day. I said I would like to very much indeed, but changed my mind when I heard what the problem was. The problem was a three-hour march. This was indeed a problem. Practically insoluble. Still, there it was. I hadn't done any marching in quite a time, nearly two years. It was to cut marching out of my life that I had so eagerly embraced the rigours of a motor-cycling career, and at a still earlier stage had become a signaller. In fact, looked at one way, my whole military life had been motivated by this strange, strong, inner urge to sit down. I guess the C.O. must have noticed me looking thoughtful, because presently he suggested that it might give me a better all-round view of American training if I took a jeep and rode round on a tour of inspection.

One or two had come back from leave, and were apparently feeling the effects. Hunger without being able to face food, and that unpleasant taste of old coins in the mouth. I looked in the Club and found that the poker game had started. There were three American nurses sitting in on it, chewing gum and pretending they were wicked young women in a Pacific Coast saloon.

They wear blue uniforms and have commissioned rank. Rhyme from an American Army paper I found:

Sing us a song of pain and penance—  
Army nurses are all lieutenants.  
Whether they're blondes, brunettes or titians,  
The hell of it is: They have commissions.  
And privates, creatures of low degree,  
Can dream but never hope to be  
More to the nurses that win their hearts  
Than pulses, temperatures and charts.

I went down to the orderly room and took a 'phone call asking for ten drivers to report somewhere the following morning at 5 a.m. Presently

the C.O. came in and renewed his expressions of concern that he wasn't helping me. Actually I usually try not to be helped; you learn much more amusing things if left unconduted.

I asked him about crime and punishment. What would happen, for instance, to a man on his return from overstaying his leave a week?

It goes more or less as follows: The man is brought before his Company Commander and asked to explain himself. Explanations tend to be on a rather more melodramatic note in their Army than ours. The man may possibly say that, having been drugged, he was set on by a gang of men who locked him in the basement of an empty house, where he had remained imprisoned until finally, by resourcefulness and devotion to duty, he had managed to escape and immediately returned to duty. "Probably been laying up with a woman or drinking," commented the C.O. sadly. The Company Commander then asks him for some kind of evidence, some concrete fact, some circumstantial support of this story. "Normally a soldier's case fails there," said the C.O.

The Company Commander then goes to the Battalion Commander. "Sir," he says, "I have the case of Jones. He was absent without leave for seven days, and I think he ought to go for trial."

The Battalion Commander then sees Jones, and he hears his story, which is gathering plausible colour with every telling. Being no more impressed than the Company Commander, he goes to see the Colonel about it. The Colonel probably sees the man, and if he is no more impressed he recommends the Company Commander to prefer charges. At the subsequent court-martial the man, if guilty, probably gets three days' detention for every one he was absent. He normally stays with his unit and sleeps on a wooden mattress with one blanket, runs to and from his work, has a 'P' for prisoner written on his back, and a large bull's-eye for his escort to shoot at if he tries to take a raincheck.

Notice that the Battalion Commander is purely an adviser. He has no power to punish a man himself and charges are preferred by the Company Commander, not the Battalion Commander.

At this point in our deliberations there came a knock at the door and a young man of craggy dimensions appeared. He walked up to the C.O. without saluting and said: "Can you direct me to the Cannon Company?"

"What Company are you from?" demanded the C.O. The man told him.

"Don't you know how to report properly?"

"Sir, I wasn't sent to report to you, I was sent——"

"You go back and do it again."

He went out and came in again. This time he saluted rather self-consciously and said: "Suh, can you direct me to the Cannon Company, please?"

By this time the C.O. was getting a bit annoyed.

"That's not the proper way. Jest you go out and do it again."

"Sir, I'm sorry, but I ain't no good at this kind of ting."

"Go out and do it again."

This time, after a short interval, he was perfect.

"Sir. Private —— asking permission to speak to the Major."

The Major told him the way to the Cannon Company.

"And in future do things right. Understand?"

"Yes, sir," said the man, uncomfortably. "Thanks a lot."

After he had gone I asked the C.O. his ideas on the recreational side of battalion life. He was all for leaving the men alone. "We aim to work them so hard during the day, they won't feel like anything at night."

The idea of a concert party seemed unpractical to him. "Our soldiers are a little bit temperamental about these things. They like to have a detail like that, but they won't do it in their spare time. They won't do it without time off for it, and the result ain't worth it."

I said I should have thought there would have been enough men anxious to do it. The way a concert party starts in our Army is not usually through official inspiration but because someone connected with entertainment, either as a professional or as an amateur, is interested enough to start one. The C.O. said yes, there was plenty of talent available, but it wasn't prepared to operate on a spare-time basis. He called to mind the case of a singer who, whenever he was given facilities to perform, expressed his appreciation by going on a three-day drunk. So the C.O. had withdrawn his sponsorship.

"Same with my officers. I don't try to dictate to them what they do in their spare time, like I've known a lot of Battalion Commanders do, and I think they work all the better because I don't."

I said that certainly the general atmosphere of personal interest in the job was much more marked than in our Army. For instance, a little bit earlier on a man had come in and asked the machine-gun officer if there was any chance of a transfer, because he thought the machine-gun was a good weapon. "It's a sweet job," he said. "And I'd like to work for your Company." That would sound kind of funny in the British Army.

The C.O. said: "Well, we try to indoctrinate a man with the feeling that his weapon is the best possible thing. And if he learns to handle it right he'll be a hero and come back alive, and if he don't he won't."

We passed on to the question of church parades. In the American Army there are no compulsory church parades. People wouldn't like them.

The C.O. said: "I despise to go to a little church where there's a hick ceremony. Makes you feel kind of atheist to go to. But that's what we get. Can't get enough people to go. Another thing, preachers tend to be narrow-minded. Reminds me of the time when I was in infantry school at Georgia. There was a lovely little church and I used to go. There were never many people there. But what did the preacher do? —used to lambast people who were there instead of people who weren't. I got so disgusted I wouldn't go there any more."

I said I had been told that more American soldiers went to church now they were this side of the water to compensate for home-sickness.

"They'll get to it all right, but not this side of the Channel. They've made so many moves and been so far a little thing like coming over here don't worry them."

He then worked out a little table of the thirteen completed moves they had made over the last three years, which came to 9,000 miles, not counting the journey to this country. About twenty-five per cent of the men had been with the unit all the time, and about fifty per cent most of the time.

We walked back to the mess. On the way we stopped a car and the C.O. reproved the driver for his glaring headlights. It turned out to be the Assistant Chief of Staff. But he took it quite well on the whole.

Back in the Club a bunch of boys was whooping it up. The C.O. and I stopped in for a drink. Harry the bar-keep listened in to what we were saying. "Gee, dat's intersting," he said at one point. I went to bed, but found it difficult to get to sleep with the gramophone playing the 'Jersey Bounce'. The party closed down about one, and they all took the nurses home, singing and riding their bikes into hedges through the night.

Now summing up. There are considerable differences of spirit and approach in the two Armies.

The American flair for being purposeful and significant about anything however trifling is a great help in Army life, which is inevitably composed largely of trifling things.

The American is much more conscious of and bent on developing professional skill than we are. Do what we may and improving greatly as we are, our officer system is still based on the attitude of the gentleman farmer, the gifted dilettante, the pleasant fellow. Very conscientious, oddly hard-working, but more concerned for the men's comfort than fighting efficiency.

Mark you, we have no monopoly of amateurism, and I expected rather more freedom from red tape in the American Army than there actually is. Americans seem to spend just as much time on spit and polish as we do, but their standard of results in this direction is lower. Perhaps this is an expression of their constant determination to resent being ordered about. Englishmen, of all ranks, take orders with far less question. The ignominies of K.P. (fatigues to us) are much less keenly felt. The English batman is much more completely and less resentfully at his officer's beck and call than the American striker.

Americans look on the Army more as a nine-to-six job. Their loyalty is more akin to the pride of a business man employed by a first-rate firm. Whereas the British soldier's loyalty is based on the feeling that we mustn't let the old place down, plus personal attachment to officers, which I think Americans are too independent to develop to the same extent unless their officer is an acknowledged hero.

But this is trespassing on to the larger issues. Coming back to the difference between our two Armies, we call the sergeant-major (top sergeant) 'sir' and no nonsense. We stand to attention much more stiffly. We march more formally. We haven't so much to say. We go to bed earlier and need more sleep, but less food, and we get far less money (but we are pretty well accustomed to being not so well off as other people).

The outstanding thing about the American Army to an Englishman is not how different it is, but how very much the same. The quartermaster who hates to part with his stores, the corporal who gets above himself, the stupid officer, the never-wrong Adjutant, the lazy cook, the plausible mess sergeant are to be found all through both Armies. And through the ranks of both there is the same quality of irony and cynicism, the same humour of sardonic resentment, the same oddly pathetic acceptance of the discomfort of it all.

## JUMPING THROUGH THE HOLE\*

They fitted me with parachute  
And helmet for my head,  
The instructor looked with expert eye,  
"They fit you fine," he said

*Extract from Parachute Training School rondelet.*

*Tuesday.*

WE MARCHED EIGHT MILES FROM THE AIRBORNE FORCES DEPOT TO THE station, travelled two hours by train, and marched about four miles to the Parachute Training School. There were several hundred of us. We marched into a field clustered with Nissen huts, and the men were ordered to draw blankets before going to dinner. The officers walked round to the R.A.F. mess, which was extravagantly comfortable by the standards of most Army messes. I shared a small room with a Major in the Cameronians; a quiet, demure sort of man, aged 27, though looking older. We had lunch and were marched to hear the Camp Commandant's address.

He was what is known as comfortably built, and, after drawing us round him in a circle, he delivered his welcoming address with the facility of constant practice. From now on our security must be 100 per cent, and there were plenty of people about to ensure that we lived up to this ideal. Absence without leave on this course was treated as an even more serious offence than usual. Red berets made their wearers conspicuous. We should therefore be all the more careful about behaviour on buses. There was nothing which put the Army into disrepute more quickly than bad behaviour on buses. The penalty for walking more than two abreast in the road was five days' C.B., a measure which was all the more vigorously in force since a woman had, the other day, been killed. We were, of course, under the R.A.F. for all training, and there must be no question of slackness in responding to their orders.

That was roughly the gist of his little talk, which was followed by a secret session with the officers, in which he enlarged on the question of relations with the R.A.F. Of course, the men in our platoons were just as much our responsibility as if we were in an ordinary unit, and we should therefore show the same interest in them as if the arrangements were permanent. Of course, there was no need to remind us of this possibility, but he did so just the same. He emphasized that any misbehaviour led to immediate expulsion from the Airborne Forces, and quoted the case of an officer who celebrated winning his wings by shouting "Action Stations, Go!" to old ladies getting off buses. This had apparently led to the premature arrest of his career as a parachutist.

Arrangements for cashing cheques had had to be modified in the light of recent experiences. If a cheque bounced he was personally responsible, and he must, therefore, insist on a reasonable degree of notice. Badges of rank must be worn on denims (canvas suits used for training). This was insisted on since the unfortunate instance when a

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\* Illustrations in this chapter and the next are by Ian Fenwick.

junior R.A.F. officer had sharply pulled up a Brigadier for not saluting him.

We went back to unpack. The Major, who was a regular soldier, carried what he described as 'all his worldlies' with him, and unpacked with system and care, shaking his head disapprovingly over the last tenant's litter left behind in the chest-of-drawers.

*Wednesday.*

We paraded on the square at 7.45 a.m., dressed for the first time in our jumping-jackets. These are zip-fastened canvas jackets which hang down nearly to the knees, with a flap on the back which buttons up against the stomach.

The right markers were called for, the men waiting at the side of the square marched on parade, the platoon sergeants called the roll, and the officers doubled to join their platoons.

We were then marched off the square across the road into the aerodrome, and halted in front of the main parachute training hangar. The R.A.F. instructors marched out at four paces interval. Our names were called and we had to run out and form up in sticks of ten alongside our particular instructor.

Owing to the vagaries of establishment, our sergeant was only a corporal. He was a Londoner, red-cheeked and rubbery, with an attractive smile. He marched us into the hangar, an enormous barn-like place full of slides, swings, ropes, ladders, overhead railways and various less obvious training devices. Much of the concrete floor was cushioned with mats and mattresses.

The corporal told us to sit down on some of these mats. "Now, let's gen up on you," he said. He took down particulars of our name, rank, weight, height, religion and whether we were single or married. At 26 I was the old man of the party, which was fairly mixed in type and origin.

On the intellectual side there was Sergeant C——, aged 22, who came from an Airborne Security Section. He was a very solemn young man with glasses and a pugnacious expression, like a rather highbrow chow. There were two others from the Intelligence Corps: Corporal K., aged 22, and Corporal H., aged 25. They were both tall and thin, H. having golden hair and K. dark. H. was also handicapped by a bad leg. I had marched behind him yesterday and he had had to hobble manfully all the way. Corporal D., aged 24, came from the Army Fire Service. He was unassumingly muscular, with cropped hair and a lot of quiet canine charm.

Private P., R.A.C., aged 24, was the same pleasant kind. Gunner W., aged 22, was more physically flamboyant, with a shock of hair, red face and big mouth. The biggest man was Guardsman M., who had qualified as a parachutist some time before, but had been sent back to the Guards following a sensationally unpunctual return from leave. The remaining two were the smallest and therefore had the most to say. In the days to come I found it difficult to decide whether Private G., aged 18½, from the Lovat Scouts, made more noise than Private A., aged 20, from the R.A.O.C., or whether it was the other way round. I think Private G. had the loudest mouth, but Private A. was the more persistent.

When he had finished taking our names, or perhaps I should say genning up, the corporal addressed us. "You are Section Four of Syndicate C. Now don't forget that—Syndicate C, Section Four. My name is Haynes—B. J. Haynes. You will be seeing quite a bit of me in the next week or two, and you will be having quite an enjoyable time, we hope. Now, I have no doubt you have been hearing a lot of high-faluting stories about what goes on here. People being killed and all the rest of it. But take it from me, that is a lot of duff gen. Do as you're told, and you will have quite an enjoyable time. Only one thing to it—that is, mental approach. That's all there is about parachuting—mental approach."

At this point an inextricable public address system started functioning in the hangar, making a lot of confused sounds of the kind that are best represented by asterisks. "Hear what it said?" asked the corporal. "No," replied someone. "Can't be us, then," said the corporal. "Now, you will be jolted about a good bit this next few days. So keep off the beer. It may make you feel wonderful for the moment, but it don't do any good when it comes to jumping. It may make just that little difference. Right, now you will be marched over to hear the C.O.'s address."

We found ourselves in the Station cinema. There were tip-up seats, while a piano solo of "South of the Border" was being played. So far we had been feeling a bit dubious and out of water. The music, which went on for some time, induced a sharp upward trend. Incidentally, it was just the kind of nostalgic music which is often condemned as demoralizing for troops. I think most people find Dorothy Lamour singing 'Thanks for the Memory' at least as strengthening as the band of the Brigade of Guards. After about ten minutes the music stopped and we were shown a short film called 'Jumps Ahead', about learning to parachute. Then the Station Commander, a burly Wing Commander, gave us an opening address.

We marched back to the hangar and spent forty minutes being taught to fall correctly. The essence of falling is to jam your legs and feet firmly together so that the one leg forms a strengthening splint to the other. The formula is:

"Head well forward; shoulders round;  
Knees together and watch the ground."

You fall either sideways to the right, or sideways to the left. If you are falling sideways right you swivel your feet round so that the toes are pointing away to your left, and collapse on to the mat. If you are falling sideways left you point your toes to the right. In either case you have your knees slightly bent, and take the preliminary shock with your knees, rolling over on to your hips instead of falling down flat on your hips.

We practised doing this first solo and then hanging on to ropes. The rope hangs down from the ceiling and has some sort of elastic attachment at the top so that you can roll over on to the mat without changing your grip on the rope, which stretches to accommodate your fall. It is a good idea to hold on to the rope, otherwise it flies up and hits you

in the face. Next we practised falling in pairs, standing face to face, holding hands and taking turns to fall over. It was followed by a half-hour break for tea and buns in the Y.M.C.A.

The next thing was P.T., which was conducted in the cinema by a loud-voiced and dynamic little man. There was nothing specifically interesting about the P.T. except a certain insistence on jumping up and down, and an exercise in which you stand with your legs together and circulate your knees to develop their muscles. At 11.20 a.m. we were marched across to the hangar into one of a row of lecture rooms at one end of it.

It was a fairly small room with backless benches and a magic-lantern apparatus. Someone called out "Room, attention!" and a tough, elastic, sardonic Flight-Lieutenant began to address us.

"My name is Murphy," he said—"one of the Glasgow Murphys," he added, for the benefit of the large Scottish contingent. "It's written up on my chest here—Flight-Lieutenant Murphy. If any of you want to come and see me any time, come and see me." He then gave the names of the sergeant-instructors.

"Did any of you report to the M.O. at the depot for strains of any kind? Stand up any man who did." Four men stood up. One had fallen ten feet on his back, one had developed a stiff knee, the third man had twisted his left ankle, sliding on the assault course, and the fourth man had banged his knees on a cliff.

"The M.O. said it would last for this Course, but I would have to rest it after," he said. "I think it will be all right. He was a jumping M.O."

"We are not going to drop you off the Course," said Murphy, "but if a man comes here with an injury in the first place, we don't do ourselves justice if it is blamed on to parachuting. We have to get our statistics straight. Also, we can look after him. Give him massage and electric treatment, and keep him all right if we know what's wrong with him. So don't be afraid to get up and say so." Three more men stood up: a stiff shoulder from some time ago, a bad toe, and a sprained knee.

"Are there any men who have applied to return to their unit? Any men who don't like the idea of parachuting? If so, see me after this.

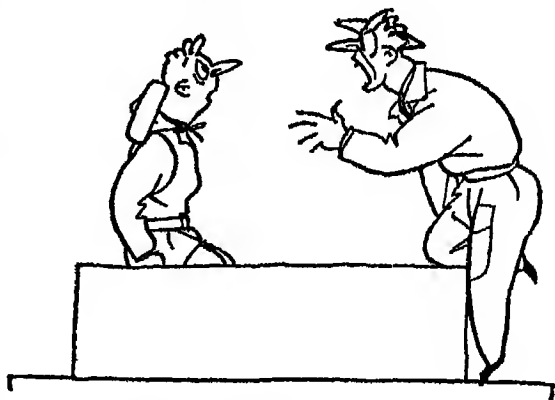
"Now, the parachutes are packed by W.A.A.F. The packing-room is alongside the hangar. Some of you may have seen it from the windows. Now, when they see your handsome faces looking through the window, they'll naturally reciprocate. Won't be able to help themselves. Who could possibly resist a handsome set of men like you? But there's a notice in that room which says: 'A man's life depends upon every parachute you pack', and if they get to tying a lovers' knot instead of the correct one it may be you who will be sorry, so don't look through those windows.

"You will do eight jumps while you are here. Three from a balloon, two in the daytime, and one night jump; the other five will be aircraft jumps. Now, this business of parachuting is quite simple, but you must be able to do it subconsciously. Our job is to develop you to a pitch where you cannot help doing the right thing. So in this training you must not get bored. You really must work as hard as you know how. Now, when you come to the night ballooning and you get dismissed early, you may feel tempted to go off and have a few noggins and work

up a little Dutch courage. Don't do it. It doesn't make a twopenny curse of difference to how you feel, you will quiver just the same when you have to jump 700 feet in the dark. And it may make just that little bit of difference to how you perform. You know the story of the mouse who came out of his hole and drank drops of whisky, then he went back to his hole, and he came out again and drank some more whisky and then some more, until finally he was shouting, 'Bring out your bloody cats!' At which point he was killed. Now, if you go drinking, you will be like the mouse. Your reaction time won't be so good. As I say, it may make just that little bit of difference. Now, you come under the R.A.F. here. We are not so militaristic as the Army; that doesn't mean we don't appreciate smartness in others. You are picked men, so act as if you were picked men."

After lunch we paraded at 1.10 p.m., and marched back to the hangar. We had our first lesson in jumping through the hole. This is done with a wooden structure known as a 'mock aperture'. It is about eight feet high and about eight feet square with a hole in the top about three feet in diameter. You sit on the edge of the hole, push yourself off and land in the sitting or lying position on a heap of mats and mattresses below. First of all we had to practise the motion of pushing off. We sat on the edge of the structure and, supporting ourselves on our hands,

we manfully thrust our hips forward as if about to project ourselves on to the concrete floor below. You have to learn to sit relaxed on the edge of the hole just near enough to the edge to be able to take away your hands without overbalancing; then, bracing yourself on your hands, jerk your hips upwards and outwards, so that you go through the hole

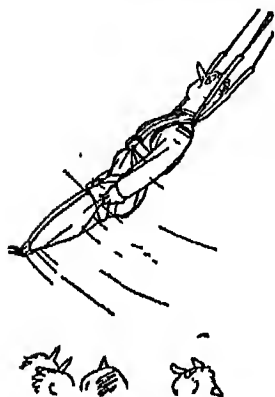


in a position of attention. I wasn't awfully good at this. I found it difficult to launch forth strongly. I fell weakly through the hole instead of throwing myself forward first. We all found it a pretty fearsome business. For while we knew this was very small beer compared with what was to come, it didn't look much fun at the time. The extraordinary thing is that you fall down quite successfully and it doesn't hurt at all. We passed on from this entertainment to the swings.

You climb up a ladder on to a fairly narrow platform which runs alongside the hangar, and fasten yourself into a parachute harness which is suspended by two wires from the ceiling. As you probably know, the parachute harness is made of webbing. There is a belt round your waist which fastens automatically, then, wriggling in an intimately feminine way, you pull another belt down under your seat. You thread

two lengths of harness round your legs under your waist belt and lock them automatically in the same locking-place. Then, feeling very much trussed up, you reach up, grasp the webbing above you and, with considerable misgivings, jump off.

The platform on which you are standing is not more than fifteen feet high, but heights take on an entirely different complexion when you are faced with the prospect of jumping off them. They instantly multiply by three. You find yourself hanging on to the side of the wall, and filled with a passionate fear of losing your balance when you get anywhere near the edge. This is a reaction common to everyone under these particular circumstances. Once you have jumped it is delightful. You swing through the air, backwards and forwards, in a considerable arc.



There were four swings in a row. We took it in turns to launch ourselves in this way, and to help each other on with the harness. While we were swinging, the instructor told us how to make a turn by pulling on the rigging lines. When he shouted "Trees" we had to cover our faces with our hands and roll ourselves up into a ball so as to offer the minimum resistance.

We passed on to study the business of putting on a harness. The parachute harness is always the same size, and has to be adjusted for your particular fit. It works on the same principle as military equipment in general. You just go on lengthening or shortening various parts of the webbing until it fits your particular range of physical irregularities. At first you are taught to fix it pretty tightly, more tightly than is really necessary. The point of this is that it gives you a feeling of security which you don't get if the harness is loose.

We went back to the other hangar for more jumping through the hole. I was a bit better this time. The funny thing is that when you jump out properly at attention, it jars you to land on the mattresses. When you come out anyhow it doesn't hurt at all, because you are not stiff—always providing that you don't ring the bell, which is the term applied to banging your head on the other side of the aperture as you go through it. This was the unpleasant experience of Sergeant C., who, instead of tilting his head and looking upwards, fell into the very considerable temptation of looking down on the ground where he was going. It is awfully difficult not to do this, but you are liable to catch yourself a very nasty conk if you do.

At 4.15 p.m. we marched out to dismiss, and at 4.16 p.m. we were marched back again to wait until 4.30 p.m. Our instructor told us we were fairly good for the first time.

After tea I went round to the orderly room to borrow a typewriter. The sergeant-major was presiding. Three men came in and stood to attention before him.

"You from D Course?" snapped the sergeant-major, who, after long years of barking at people, seemed to find it difficult to modulate his voice to any other terms.

"Pardon?" said one man.

"Call me 'sir'," bellowed the sergeant-major. "What's the order affecting leaving the camp?"

"We was coming back in a few minutes, sir," said the man.

"The Course detail says you will book out when you leave the camp. I don't care if you were only going for one minute. What's your excuse?"

"Gone to meet me sister, sir, at the bottom of the road."

"You'll have to find a better excuse tomorrow when you go in front of the Course Commander. Three of you meeting one sister, eh? Very nice."

He turned to the corporal.

"These three bodies failed to book out. Take necessary action against them."

Another man came in and marched up to the sergeant-major.

"You sent for me, sir?"

"Where's your belt? Don't appear in front of me improperly dressed. Run up to the mess, tell Corporal Taylor his body will be down here tomorrow at 7.30 for potato-picking. You will be there too."

The sergeant-major turned to a corporal.

"Just saw a man wearing no belt. About five feet ten inches; very new beret; R.A. badge on it. Go and pick him up."

When the corporal had gone, the sergeant-major ruminated to the room in general. "Look at that corporal. Thought we had a smart N.C.O. when he came. Look at him now."

After a bit the corporal returned to say there was no one in sight anywhere. The sergeant-major carefully assumed his greatcoat, pulled on his gloves, and cycle-clips, and prepared to proceed homewards.

It is remarkable to be able to live so far beyond military reproach, not for just an hour but every day of the week.

I went to sleep that night with my knees and feet jammed tightly together as advised by our instructor.

#### *Thursday.*

After the same morning parades we started jumping through the mock aperture at 8.30 a.m. We jumped through seven times each.

"Feet slip forward. Hips well out. Head up. Throw yourself forward into the hole. Throw yourself forward as if you really meant it. It doesn't matter if your feet hit the other side. That won't hurt you. Just keep your head back or your head will bang forward and hit it."

That is the essence of the problem. When you jerk your head upwards and backwards, as instructed, the risk of banging it on the edge of the hole where you have just been sitting seems very real. The tendency is to bend forward so as to clear the edge of the hole behind you. But owing to the extraordinary influence of the head upon the body's centre of gravity the result is very liable to be a swing in the opposite direction, so that you bang your head on the opposite side of the hole.

The corporal kept on assuring us that if we kept our head well back we could not possibly hit it. He demonstrated by jumping himself, but it was not a very convincing jump, strangely. His head shaved the near edge every time. It seemed to be pure chance that he didn't hit

his head, and much safer to bend it a little forward as you went out. But he never did hit it, so we gradually began to accept his ruling on the matter.

We finished the period by doing one more jump with another section, which also performed for our benefit.

The order to jump is given by the instructor, who tells you to look up at him and then shouts "Action Stations!" in an urgent voice, and "Go!" in a voice like the wrath of God. The expressions on people's faces as they go through the hole are very funny. There is a common note of startled horror. He shouts "Go!" so loudly that there is very little possibility of hesitating. Any sign of hesitation simply horrifies the instructor. Of course the whole point is to condition you to jump without hesitation whenever you are told to, whatever the circumstances.

When we got to the cinema for P.T. the seats were still set out for a film the night before, so we were taken for a road run and walk instead. This is a much more persistently strenuous form of activity, but it is greatly preferred to P.T. Interesting, because there are far more rest pauses in a P.T. period; far more opportunities for taking things quietly at the back of the hall, or, if you are subtle, at the front of the hall. If you go for a road run and march everyone has to be equally strenuous.

We sat waiting in the same lecture room as yesterday. I sat between J. and P., the other two officers in our platoon.

"Some frightful people got married in the *Tailer*, today," said J. out of the blue. "One chap in particular. Looks like a fish." Conversation flagged; we went on waiting. Then we all stood up for the Syndicate Commander, who started the proceedings rather unexpectedly by calling a roll.

"You have been working hard, and some are getting it, and some aren't so far," he said. "Now, I am going to talk to you about making a diagonal landing, left or right. That's the theme.

"Now, this business of having the feet and knees together is sound—very sound. Otherwise the risk of damage is much greater than if one leg is acting as a splint to the other. . . . Now, it is important not to land with pointed toes; you want to land on the flattest part of the foot, with your head forward and your shoulders round, so that you lose your balance completely. Now, you drop at probably fourteen miles per hour. It is unnatural to fall over as you touch down. You don't fall over when you jump from a wall; the instinct is to spread your feet to maintain your balance. You have to guard against that instinct. You want to roll over quickly, unhesitatingly, and if I have two injured ankles in all your jumps I will consider myself unlucky. And if there's one banged head I'll consider you awkward."

A series of magic-lantern slides were shown. Photographs of the various stages of landing on the ground correctly and incorrectly. Each picture was orchestrated by the feverish, grubby thumb of the magic-lantern projectionist.

"There you are—look at him!" said Murphy, pointing out one slide. "He lands on his toes, his knees and his nose. A perfect three-point landing. If any man in this room lands like that, I'll shoot him myself."

He told us about the 'oscillation gremlins', which come running under the canopy just before the parachutist touches down, so that

instead of landing steadily, he is oscillating, and therefore less able to control his landing. He showed us the way of reducing this swinging by pulling on the forward left webs. You reach up in front of you and pull down.

For about the first time in my life I found no difficulty in concentrating until the end of the lecture. If one's grasp of every other subject were so conclusively tested at the end of term, teaching would be a more successful profession.

It went on until noon, when we broke for lunch, to parade again at 1.15 p.m. We were taken out into a field and taught how to fold a parachute on landing. There is a definite technique. You pull out the chute and roll it up in as small a compass as possible; plait the rigging like a woman's hair, then roll the whole thing up and tie it into the cover.

Next we had to practise being dragged along the ground as if by a parachute on a windy day, and releasing ourselves while in motion. As there was no wind it wasn't possible to do it with the chutes; we had to drag each other. Some slight feeling arose between the Lovat Scout, Private G., and Guardsman M., who thought it was awfully funny to drag G. through the muddiest parts of the field so that he would have to spend a longer time than usual cleaning his equipment.

We passed on to another period on the swings. This time we used a set of swings situated next to a dreadful device called the Fan. We had heard about the Fan, and it didn't sound much fun. It didn't look much fun. There was a queue of men waiting in no impatience to ascend a high, iron ladder and disappear into a framework perilously near the roof of the hangar. Every few seconds a throttled-looking figure would be shot forth out of one of several holes in the framework and be dashed down to apparently certain destruction. The only reassuring factor was that no one, in fact, seemed to be destroyed. The expression on their faces changed from anticipation of immediate death to self-conscious relief as they unhitched the harness and rejoined the queue for another experience.

"After all," I said to myself, "people pay to do far worse things than this in amusement parks." I watched the thing consistently and no one seemed to be hurt. It was simply a question of taking a grip on yourself. None the less, we did our swinging rather thoughtfully. Nor did we concentrate very hard on the ensuing short talk by Corporal Haynes on the subject of how to land on your back without breaking it.

In all too short a time we found ourselves in the queue for the Fan. I jostled my way discreetly to the front of it. I found that by far the best way to deal with these disconcerting acrobatics was on no account to hesitate. He who hesitates is in considerable danger of thinking better of it. The only thing is to abandon all normal standards and follow the instructor's indications without thought, constantly reminding yourself that thousands of men have been through exactly the same processes, and scores of them this afternoon.

As I climbed, in a state of considerable trepidation, up the ladder, I found it helpful to concentrate my thoughts on the least attractive and impressive man in sight, and say, "If he can do it, then I can do it."

The principle of the multiplication of height, when faced by any

unorthodox means of descending from it, was again perfectly demonstrated.

The faces of the waiting queue seemed horribly far below, and the difficulty of keeping your balance on a platform two feet wide is extraordinary under the circumstances. You find yourself cowering against the wall, and very reluctant to allow people to pass between you and the wall. You hang on to the scaffolding tightly. On the principle of rubbing my nose in the experience, I went forward and helped fix the harness of two or three others. The man sits on the edge of a square hole, puts his arms through the shoulder-straps of an elementary harness and clips up a waist belt. The instructor stands in front of him holding the cable rather as if the man were a horse. He shouts "Action Stations—Go!" The man pushes himself off; there is a loud rattle as the cable races off the drum, and the man disappears as off a scaffold. When my turn came I found it peculiarly difficult to sit well forward on the edge as ordered by the instructor, and to abandon the precious security of



sitting well back. You know that the thing must be perfectly safe, but all the same, when you sit there, you do get the most complete feeling of hell-and-gone. There is so little time between hitching on the harness and the word "Go!" As a matter of policy they give you no time to hesitate, but in a way it seems a devilish long time; rather like the sensation of falling itself—being caught in the midst of something you can't stop.

"Now don't forget. Properly to attention as you go out. Head up, look at me and hang on tight to the seams of your trousers."

In a condition of mild physical hysteria, pushed off and was surprised to find that I was indeed holding on to the seams of my trousers as instructed. To find yourself in the air is a great relief, and it is an even profounder relief to find yourself on the ground again.

"That's a good fault—landing sitting," said the Syndicate Sergeant to me as I got up. He explained that it meant I had come out in a good position. I rejoined the queue to repeat the performance. When it was ended the Syndicate Sergeant said to our instructor: "Give them a smoke, they're a bit ropy." Our corporal was annoyed by this suggestion that anyone was ropy. He even thought it was a confession of weakness. "Ropy enough for a smoke," said Guardsman M. Private A. described how he had been scared stiff and wondered whether everyone felt the same. The corporal immediately started enlarging on the necessity to hide fear. Everyone was afraid; the thing was to hide it if you possibly could. The more it was hidden the less menacing it was to the general morale.

We marched round to the Y.M.C.A. and fell out for ten minutes. I may seem to be making rather a to-do about such a preliminary experience, but I am simply reporting the thing in the perspective it assumed to us.

The next period was devoted to learning how to sit in the aircraft. You number off first and emplane in such a way that all the odd numbers find themselves forward of the hole and all the even numbers aft of the hole. You sit facing each other. We sat alongside the wall of the hangar with two kitbags to represent the jumping-hole. There was a quaintly surrealist background to this lesson. There were men swinging in large arcs a few feet above our heads; other men were jumping off ladders; others were travelling suspended by their hands from an overhead railway, and a few yards away men were jumping off a sort of round-about, while just to our right men were projecting themselves off slides. Altogether it was an odd scene.

We marched off into the other hangar where the aircraft fuselages were kept and practised the process of emplaning. Number one sits just forward of the hole on the right-hand side of the 'plane facing forward; number two sits on the left-hand side just behind the hole, and so on. We did a jump through the fuselage hole, which naturally seemed elementary after the Fan. We did a few more practice jumps from the wooden frame, and then the Field Security Sergeant, who hadn't quite got the idea of pushing himself off, was made to do two special jumps.

In bed that night I felt a mild apprehension about the Fan next day.

#### *Friday.*

We emplaned and jumped through the dummy fuselage, then moved over to another fuselage fixed higher off the ground and did two jumps under the eye of Captain Midwood, the Course Commander, who, I was fascinated to observe, seized every opportunity of jumping through the hole himself. Incidentally, the greater height of this fuselage made it no more difficult than the lower one. We did four more jumps through the wooden frame and spent the next period fitting 'chutes to one another. You find yourself taking a keen interest in this pedestrian pursuit.

Half an hour's break and then we were marched to the Fan. There was no one there. The programme had been changed. Instead, we did some falls on the elastic ropes and then some backward rolls. In doing a backward roll you point your feet to an angle of forty-five degrees in the direction in which you wish to fall. For instance, if you point your feet to the right, you then fall over on to the right buttock. In backward rolling it is all the more necessary to keep the head well forward and thus avoid the strong tendency for it to fall back on the ground, which is liable to cause concussion. The nearer you can get to rolling over like a ball the better. It is also important to roll over on one side. If you do a straightforward back somersault you may easily damage the base of the spine.

We jumped off a rostrum four feet high and rolled over in the approved manner. We swung ourselves off ladders on to the mats.

At first you stand on the bottom rung of a ladder holding on to two rings suspended from a trapeze. There were five ladders, I think; you each stand there in the same position and when the instructor calls your number, jump off and roll over on the mat. Next time you go a step higher, until finally you reach the top of the ladder, which is about ten feet high. I must say it didn't feel frightfully secure standing on the top rung of the ladder, but of course one does get used to that kind of thing.

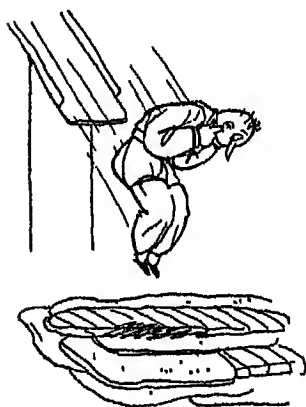
I jumped badly in this period. I kept lunging forward to counteract an imaginary tendency for my legs not to clear the ladder. The result was that instead of landing in the proper self-contained way, I sprawled forward on to the mat as if I had tripped off the ladder, instead of making a controlled jump. I went back to the lower rungs to see if I could do it better from there; but it didn't seem to work. Some temporary indecision prevented me from following the instructor's instructions. I was relieved to find that my technique on the slide, which we tried next, was satisfactory.

There were two slides together as in a swimming-bath. The only difference was that instead of falling into water you fell on to the mat. The slide is better than most of these artificial gadgets because you concentrate on the business of rolling over without having to worry about supporting yourself. In most of the gadgets which teach falling, you have to support yourself up to the moment when you fall, and for

the not very strong-armed this is a physical diversion which prevents full concentration on the falling.

Last period was in the form of a North-country monologue by the Warrant Officer in charge of parachute-packing. This was obviously one of the star turns of the Course,

"Good morning. Fine body of men," said the Warrant Officer. "Good job we have a Navy, though. . . . Now, I'm going to give you a rest from this synthetic training. The gaffer says to me, 'Never seen such a miserable crowd in all my life.' Well, now we are organized I think we shall have a smoke. . . . We do this every week . . . makes you laugh, you know. . . . Now, about this business of parachuting, I was



sheltering from the rain under a haystack . . . it's a terrible thing they don't give you a shoulder badge for the greatcoat. They nearly die of pneumonia in this weather. . . . Now, the parachute is 28 feet in diameter, and subject to you missing the hole on the left as you come down it will land you perfectly safely. The canopy is made of silk, 86 yards of material in each parachute, and you can't tear it. A silk handkerchief breaks at 5 lbs. pressure, the parachute breaks at 180. I have never known a rigging break. The harness is strong enough to bring down a light aeroplane comfortably. It weighs 24 lbs." This was accompanied by a running commentary of funny jokes and whimsical sayings which certainly compared favourably with the efforts of many comedians, who lack the other qualification of knowing about parachutes. One of the instructors came in wearing a parachute which the Warrant Officer pulled out as the man walked the length of the room, to demonstrate just what happens when the parachute opens. He ended with a strong appeal to us to fold parachutes properly as we were taught after jumping, and thus help the girls who do the difficult and not overpaid job of packing them. It would also help if we didn't steal the extension on the top. It was also necessary to be careful when carrying the

'chute out to the dropping-ground in the bus not to burn it with cigarettes.

After lunch we fell through the high fuselage twice and then through the aperture. The corporal said I was not pushing my hips out enough. There was thus the danger of catching the back of the parachute on the hole as I went out and tipping my head forward against the opposite side, with painful results.

We then did two jumps through the Fan. We still found it an ordeal. I made a point of taking a rigidly firm grip on myself and refused to consider any question as to the advisability of what I was doing. The system worked quite well, but I think its successful practice depends to a considerable degree on the digestion. It isn't always possible to be unquestioning.

P.T. was conducted by our own corporal. He introduced a number of games. These are always supposed to make P.T. enjoyable, but I think most people find them depressing. Personally I would sooner stand there and straightforwardly do my share of flinging my arms upwards, backwards and sideways than run those dreadful relay races in which the runner carries a pole which everyone has to clear as he runs down the hall. We also had to practise high jumping. I didn't think much of this either, but I dutifully made the effort. At school I was relatively a bit of a dab at high jumping, or at least I cut a less ludicrous figure at it than I did at most other forms of athletics, but the flair seemed to have faded. I only succeeded in kicking the bar up into my face, which was extremely painful. It was followed by a sequence on the swings, some jumps off a stationary box and some work on the ropes, which we were supposed to climb. I was beginning to feel too tired to care, and was very relieved when the last period was a lecture.

It was given by Murphy, our Syndicate Officer. He started by calling the roll. Never knew such a man for calling the roll.

"Well, time's wearing on," he said. "You jump on Monday morning." He went on to give us some more reassuring talks about the parachute. Each one was dummy-dropped with a 300-lb. load as a preliminary test. A log-book was kept for each one in which the name of the packer was recorded. We were at liberty to look at the log-book if we liked. The whole object of the course was the elimination of chance. All the precautions and the warnings were directed to this end. Nine times out of ten you could land quite safely without taking any notice of any of them.

"Fitting your 'chute is important. It doesn't matter if it's slack, but it's a question of confidence. If you feel the harness pressing on you you feel safer than if it's loose."

He told us about the programme on Monday. The first jump is done from a balloon moored at 700 feet. He told us about our positions in the balloon-cage, which depended upon the order in which we were to jump.

"You'll feel your hair crawling up the back of your neck. It's nothing to worry about; if you make up your mind you'll go all right."

He told us about the different reactions.

"You get the very quiet man, and the man who tries to whistle and can't, and the man who looks down the hole and shouts to the people

on the ground to run over and get him a cup of tea. But it doesn't matter how they look," said Murphy, "they all feel just the same. It's a queer feeling. A very queer feeling. But it's simply a question of having a bit of moral courage. That's all there is to it—moral courage." He asked if there were any questions, and someone asked how long a parachute took to open. "It takes two and three-fifth seconds to open and in that time you drop about 100 feet. From the aircraft it opens quicker because of the slipstream. It opens in just under two seconds." He described in detail the whole process of dropping.

### *Saturday.*

We started with a jump through the fuselage, then a lot of jumps from the wooden aperture and several more from the fuselage. We were now operating in sticks of five. Instead of each man being given the order "Action Stations, Go!" it was only given to the first man, the other four jumping when the instructor shouted their number.

The main difficulty is to roll off the mat quickly enough to avoid being jumped on by the man coming behind. But in fact it is extremely difficult for him to catch up before you hit the ground, and you develop a superhuman aptitude for getting out of the way.

We spent the second period on the slides, being introduced to the process of lying on them prone, facing upwards, so as to roll off them in a back somersault. Murphy, the Syndicate Officer, spoke to me about keeping my elbows clear of the ground when falling. You have to eliminate the tendency to break your fall with your hands, which are relatively fragile when falling at any speed. It feels natural to put out your hands as you roll over, but it isn't advisable. We rolled over so much that my knees were getting very fatigued. After the break we went out into the field again to practise packing parachutes and releasing ourselves from the harness. There was a considerable wind, and I was dragged about eighty yards before getting clear of the tackle. I felt that it was getting rather out of control. The running figures in the rear seemed to be running to my rescue. The leg straps seemed impossibly tight and unmoved by my breathless efforts to unfasten them. Eventually I emerged and was left lying on the ground slightly breathless while the parachute still went bowling on.

In the afternoon we had a session on the Fan, and then on a contraption in which you were swung through the air until the instructor unexpectedly pressed a button. The harness then fell open and dropped you on the ground. We had some more practice on fitting 'chutes and dropping through apertures and then, it being Saturday afternoon, we were allowed to watch a rugby match instead of doing P.T.

### *Sunday.*

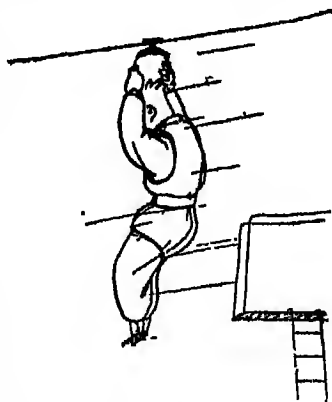
There was a good deal of gossip to the effect that we were making our first jump today, but in fact we had parades as usual. The most noticeable feature of the day was that it rained hard until 3 p.m. Because of this we had P.T. in the hangar. I was not inclined to over-exert myself for fear of producing some last-minute muscular strain. We were examined in sliding by the Syndicate Sergeant. We had to slide down and roll over twice. We were all passed O.K. except the Lovat

Scout. During the last day he had kept on doing things wrong and generally developing a last-minute inferiority complex which took the form of trying to dodge doing things. He stayed at the back of the queue, making a great display of helping other people to put on the various harnesses, and thus playing for time.

Meantime, the Field Security Sergeant, who was the least promising man of the section, for the first day or two, had by owl-like concentration mastered the various techniques. He could now jump and fall like the others. This puzzled the instructor, who was surprised that a man who picked things up so slowly should ever pick them up at all. This whole business of ground training is taken very seriously. The instructor puts in a report on each man's performance in each period of each day, and if anyone isn't doing well at a specific thing, along comes the Syndicate Officer or the Syndicate Sergeant to check up and give special coaching. This has to be done very carefully or else the man deteriorates still further, when he feels that he isn't as good as the others and begins to worry. This was definitely the case with the Lovat Scout, who, when they started giving him special coaching, went still further to pieces.

The test was followed by a period on the Ghost Train, or monorail. This is a most dreadful contraption. You are given a sort of roller skate with a trapeze bar attached to it. You then walk the length of the hangar contemplating your chances of survival, climb up a series of ladders which bring you up near the roof of the hangar, standing on the kind of small platform provided for circus acrobats. You fix the roller-skate to an overhead cable, fasten the clip with your trembling hands, and, with the accelerating shouts of the instructors in your ears, push off. The instructor has warned you to give a good strong push off with your legs. But all I personally could achieve was a kind of swoon. It seemed most improbable that my arms would support me for the whole length of the cable, which descended at an angle of thirty degrees towards a pile of mats surrounded by a group of men, some entertained and some appalled, according to whether or not they had had their turn. You fly through the air in a state of amazement that you don't fall off. On reaching the mats, someone shouts "Go" and you drop down and roll over. In my case, the roller-skate dropped down too; in my natural anxiety I had not fastened it properly to the rail. My survival, therefore, could only be ascribed to Divine intervention. We did this twice and then went on to aperture jumping. This took on something of the atmosphere of a gymkhana with several sections competing. Our section was gratifyingly successful.

After lunch we were tested on the same apertures by Flight-Lieutenant Murphy. We did two each. I did the first one well and in the second dropped my head forward. Apart from the special word for the Lovat



Scout on the question of keeping his feet together, we were passed as competent. We did some more swings from the ladders and went on to the bomb-release, which is another surprise drop mechanism. You press a button and the man is instantly dropped to the ground. There were two of these, and the corporal left me in charge while he went off to find something. The Guardsman was suspiciously anxious to work the mechanism for the Lovat Scout, no doubt with the droll purpose of dropping him on the concrete floor instead of the mat. I therefore told the Lovat Scout to come and take his turn with me. He came over with a relief which instantly evaporated when, owing to slight error of judgment, I dropped the Field Security Sergeant on the concrete floor.

We went on the swings and then had to do a test in chinning the bar. This has never been a strong accomplishment of mine, and after spending a considerable portion of the day suspended by my arms, I was only able to perform this feat twice, which, I regret to say, didn't compare very well with the general form. We were marched into the stand-by room to wait. We hoped that this might be a prelude to doing the first jump and thus getting it over with, for we were by now heartily sick of ground training. The stand-by room, which was to become a considerable feature of the curriculum of the next few days, was a large room with windows down one side, and a concrete floor. It was quite simply furnished with three chairs and a wireless set, which was giving the news in Polish for the benefit of some Polish parachutists. Certainly it was refreshingly free from any demoralizing luxury.

The last period on Sunday, at 4.15 p.m., was a talk on tomorrow's jump.

"You parade at five to six tomorrow morning, so wash your snalls tonight; you may have to wash them again tomorrow. . . . Remember that parachuting and beer don't mix and a headache at 700 feet isn't much fun. . . . Make up your mind to jump through that hole whatever happens. . . . Don't wander off when you are told to get in the balloon; get in it. . . . Remember what I told you about relaxing. Think about your muscles instead of about the actual jump. . . . It's simply a question of a bit of moral courage. . . . You'll be all right so long as you make up your mind to go through with it."

There was a considerable sense of excitement for the rest of the day. I noticed that most people's hands were clumsier than usual at the table. Personally I was in a state of constant vibration. Self-consciousness seems to play quite a big part in this physical reaction. People are much more normal and composed by themselves than when anxious to present not too desperate an appearance to other people. I take it there must have been something abnormal in my appearance, because a W.A.A.F. officer sitting next to me at teatime, said: "What are you looking at me like that for?" when in fact I was lost in my own little nightmare world.

The interesting thing is that while everyone is naturally put out by the prospect you don't find any wish to evade the issue. You seem content to accept it as inevitable. When I went to bed, my room-mate was sitting at the table writing something. I glanced over his shoulder. He was making his will.

I retired rather thoughtfully.

## NICE POSITION IN FLIGHT

*Monday, October 18th.*

We were called at 5 a.m. I didn't bother to shave, pulled on my clothes, jumping-jacket, rubber hat and web belt. We had been issued with rubber hats yesterday afternoon: it marked our graduation into the sixth form of the parachute school. The hat is a thick rubber band with a cloth crown. No allowance is made for the possibility of landing on the top of your head, a contingency which seems neither more nor less remote than the others. You tie the hat round your chin, Dolly Varden fashion. During normal periods you wear your side hat and carry the jumping-hat tied round your neck almost as a sort of badge.

There was a cup of tea and biscuits available in the mess. When I went in there was nobody about. Murphy came in and wondered petulantly where everybody was. We paraded outside the hangar, and having made sure that everyone was there, we went to draw 'chutes. You queue up and pass in front of three large slides, out of which the 'chutes come down small slides and land at your feet. Guardsman M. wasn't feeling at all well. He certainly looked as if he had a temperature. We climbed into boxlike buses and sat there holding our 'chutes on our lap. I sat next to Sergeant C. up in the front with my back to the driver. There were two instructors in our bus. They did everything they could to work up a singsong, but it didn't meet with much response. Most people were pretty quiet, but there was a sergeant sitting opposite who tried to make out that he was feeling on top of the world, which he patently wasn't. Another man, who was determined to demonstrate his composure, started singing a song. Obviously he had meant everyone to join in, but no one did. His voice quavered on in solitude. The ride took thirty minutes. After a time the absence of noise seemed to get on some people's nerves. "For Christ's sake sing!" said one extra-nervous one. But he didn't sing himself. People were pretty true to type. Private A. was asking questions all the time on the theme of the possibility of accidents. The Lovat Scout was over-active. Sergeant C. was solemn as usual. I made a conscientious attempt to note what people said and did, but their reactions weren't really anything to write about. The strain of self-control was pretty evident. Anyone coming into the bus would have immediately sensed that some extraordinary event was impending. There were various shades of worry on every face, but nothing of any particular interest was said; perhaps because the subject of parachuting had been discussed to the exclusion of almost everything else for weeks. There was nothing left to say.

It was still dark, so we couldn't see the countryside through which we were passing. It was still pretty dark when we arrived at the dropping zone, though we knew it was a park. There were two Nissen huts up in one corner of the field; one of them was the Y.M.C.A. and the other was used for a stand-by room. We went inside and started fitting 'chutes. I found to my relief that I didn't have to make any adjustments to mine, it fitted quite well. We were given bits of string to tie them up

with afterwards, and a piece of chalk was passed round to write our names on the outside case for identification purposes after dropping. As soon as the darkness lifted a bit we could see the balloons. There were two of them: ordinary barrage balloons with a basket underneath each one. They were being towed across the dropping-zone. I looked up at those baskets and had to laugh in a strangled way. The idea of jumping out of them was so fantastic that it was almost difficult to take it seriously. The idea that we were all going to queue up and jump out of them one by one was a little odd, to say the least of it. Some people were already marching out. The corporal came round and took down the numbers of our parachutes and static lines.

Jumping started about 7.15 a.m. First the balloon went up, then after a pause a little figure appeared, gathered speed and size as it fell, until the 'chute developed, and it became identifiable as a man. They seemed to come down pretty quickly. At first I decided not to watch them. I stood and talked to Guardsman M. instead. He was looking perfectly dreadful; sitting with his legs up on a bench in one corner of the hut. The idea of him jumping was pretty absurd. The idea of any of us jumping was pretty absurd, too. The corporal paraded us to inspect our 'chutes. He pulled them about and performed some mystic evolution around the shoulder-straps which helped to bring about 'a nice high pack'. As each batch of five figures had dropped one by one, the balloon was pulled down to earth and almost immediately sent up again to repeat the process. The Y.M.C.A. was now open and some went in to have coffee and buns. I decided to wait until afterwards. I didn't want to miss the delights of the post-jump cup of tea, often impressed upon us in the lectures. But it was probably foolish, because I was very cold. My feet were damp and the parachute dragged on the shoulders. It is a pretty heavy affair. Our corporal disappeared across the dropping-zone. It was a big, rolling stretch of grassland with clumps of trees round the outskirts and in ordinary circumstances it would probably have been very attractive. The first jumpers were now beginning to come back. Among them was P., our Platoon Commander, who charmed us all by saying, "It wasn't as bad as the Fan." It was an endless sort of wait, and by any standards quite a long one. Everyone was very composed in a pale kind of way.

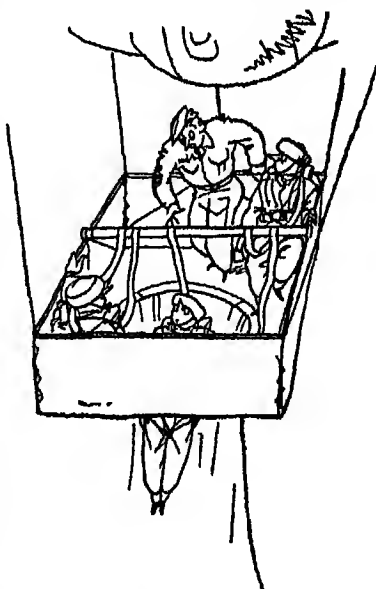
Finally, the moment came to march out to the balloon. It seemed a dreadfully long march. We were by now miserably cold and wet. The balloon was controlled by a winch mounted on a lorry. We were told to fall out about twenty yards from the lorry. They warned us against damping our parachutes on the wet ground. There were two or three lots to go before us. The balloon basket came down flat on the ground, the men climbed in and, after a slight exchange of technicalities by ground staff, were wafted away, upwards. It went up fairly smoothly, then started to blow about in what seemed to us on the ground a most sickening manner, and finally came to a halt. It was somehow odd to be able to hear the instructor's voice shouting "Action Stations, Number One—Go!" Out came Number One at a considerable speed until his parachute developed. Then the instructor on the ground started criticizing his position and giving instructions by means of a loudspeaker system. This sort of thing: "That's right, Number One. That's quite a good

position, only get your legs together, jammed together. Pull down on the forward lift webs. Right, now, you're coming down well. Watch the ground; jam those legs together."

Finally the moment came to climb in. It was a feeling quite unlike any other feeling I have ever had. You are conscious of the considerable test of will-power. There is very little room in the basket of the balloon; it is mostly devoted to the hole. Of course, there is no real danger of falling out, but you cling to the iron handles on the floor and the framework which supports the canvas side of the basket as if you were suspended from them. There is a feeling of total unreality as the balloon goes up. It isn't exactly like the feeling before the school sports, and I think on the whole it isn't as bad as that. In this case you are mentally better under control. Speaking for my own part, this was something which I was actively anxious to accomplish, whereas the one thing I wanted to do before the school sports was to be hidden until it was all over. I kept telling myself—in the balloon, not at the school sports—"A lot of people have been through that hole in the morning and so are bloody you." It is oddly comforting if you can get some sort of encouraging idea like that firmly in the forefront of your consciousness. Under circumstances like these you can control your consciousness in an almost physical way. You really can argue it into submission. Murphy, the Syndicate Officer, was jumping in our five. It was encouraging to feel that here was a man seizing the opportunity to get in an extra jump. He had told us in his lectures that he always felt the same as he did feel on his first jump, but he certainly seemed way ahead of us. He jumped first and initiated the proceedings by doing some elementary acrobatics on the bar which runs diametrically across the hole. He chinned this once or twice, said it was easy, wasn't it, and "Good-bye for now" as he whistled through the hole. But there was no time to dwell on his virtuosity.

"Right, now, you see how easy it is. Let's have four perfect jumps. Nice clean exits, correctly at attention, and good positions in flight," said our corporal breezily. "Action Stations, Number Two—Go!" There

was very little time for preparation. The thing was upon me. I had to jump third. I looked up at the instructor's beaming face; I resolved to make it my best attempt, and obey all rules, but remember doubting my physical ability to project myself off the platform. You have to sit perilously near the edge; the correct position for swinging your legs is to have half your seat suspended over the hole. "Action Stations, Number Three—Go!" shouted the instructor, and I was gone. I felt some



good old primitive fear as I fell; utterly and irretrievably out of control. I had some extremely violent emotions; a sort of mental chaos, and a sense of venturing all. Then I felt my hands clutching my trousers, and this sense of obeying a rule made in a previous life did a lot to maintain or restore mental composure. There was a tearing sound as the canopy opened, and there you are drifting in the air. We had been warned about the disconcerting jerk of the opening canopy when the fall is suddenly brought up short, but, like many other things, it is difficult to describe without either exaggerating or underestimating. Of course, there is a considerable jerk, but you are so keyed up for radical physical experiences that it doesn't mean a thing.

After a second of hanging there it was time to pull down on the forward lift webs. I bent my legs into position so that I could just see my toes, and I was just feeling O.K. when the instructor shouted, "Legs together, Number Three." I found they weren't quite together at the knees.

The flight is supposed to take about twenty-five seconds. There isn't nearly so much time to appreciate the sensation and contemplate the view as we had been led to believe. You are no sooner recovered from the first sensation of falling than you have to start concentrating on the business of landing. There is a short interlude while the ground seems a constant and fairly long distance away and then it suddenly takes shape. A carpet of grass looms up and just at this point training is the thing. You can't think quickly enough consciously until you have had plenty of experience. I made a forward landing and rolled over to the left, but seemed to bang my hip more than I need. However, there were no after-effects, but perhaps this was due to over apprehension of physical injury which led me to imagine that any point of contact with the ground was disastrous. I got up and ran round my 'chute to collapse it as instructed. Then ran to the instructor, who asked my number.

I told him my name and he said: "Very good exit, good side left landing." I walked away much more confident than I had walked up to him, having felt that I had not shown any competence on landing. I returned to roll up the 'chute and walked across to put it in the lorry with Sergeant C., who said: "Shattering, wasn't it, sir?" I didn't quite see what he meant. "Well, I meant shattering, sir, to think that a few weeks ago—well, I mean, we wouldn't have dreamed of being able to do a thing like this, and here we are standing on the eve of the greatest job of our lives."

"That certainly is shattering, Sergeant," I said. He was worried about his landing. I went into the Y.M.C.A. for the traditional cup of tea. Of course, it was a pretty wonderful feeling, but lacked the quality of exhilaration which I had been led to expect. I felt mighty pleased, but not as if I had just scored a personal triumph. I found, however, that the sense of personal triumph grew more and more in retrospect.

We drove back to camp complete with community singing and a growing sense of superiority. We talked about one man who had, at the last moment, refused to jump. There are inevitably one or two who can't quite face up to it at the last minute. It isn't always the people who hang back at the preliminary training. This particular man had

been one of the outstanding men in his section. He was young, good-looking, well built and seemed self-confident, but apparently something snapped. Incidentally, no one felt any sense of contempt; the typical comment was: "Sorry for that bloke." This reaction was reinforced, when we got back to the camp, by seeing him standing at ease outside the office, pathetically waiting to be sent back to his unit, and trying to repair his battered self-esteem. When a man refuses, he is sent back to his unit immediately, in a few hours, because of the possibly disconcerting effect on the others. When you are jumping, the last thing you want to be reminded of is the case against it.

Breakfast was at 7.45 a.m. We were only given half an hour and then had to parade at 8.15 for a lecture.

We drew another parachute and were driven out again. People were no more cheerful on this journey than they had been on the first one, and the lack of bubbling enthusiasm was more noticeable in the light of the sunny morning than it had been in the dark. We had a longer wait this time. We got there at 11 a.m. and didn't finally jump until 1.15 p.m., by which time I had rarely been colder or damper. An outsider was imported into the basket-load before ours. He had already done six jumps and then gone away on compassionate leave. A short, squat man. The balloon went up, four men jumped and the balloon came down again, with the newcomer still in it. He had refused. He walked away, swinging his static line in a sad attempt at carefreedom. We who were about to jump watched him rather glumly. Private A. was delighted at the opportunity for pessimistic surmise.

"Man refused, didn't he, Corporal?" said he as we climbed into the balloon.

"Refused? What do you mean—refused?" said the corporal, very anxious to change the subject.

"Five went up and only four jumped. Bloke came down in the basket," said A.

"Why, yes, I believe there was one who didn't fancy it," said the corporal, trying not to infect us with similar ideas. There was a slight pause while the ground operators tinkered with the mechanism. The corporal bent over to me. "Tell you what, sir, if you like a thrill, the thing to do is to look down as you come out. It's an awful sensation. We all do it." For the moment I couldn't think of any suitable reply.

This time I jumped last. Although the journey in the basket had lost little of its horrifying quality, there was a helpful tinge of familiar feeling. You could at least say to yourself that you had done the thing once. But it was noticeably windier. The basket jumped about quite a bit. We had been told to do an arms stretch when the 'chute opened, to demonstrate an alleged sense of control, before pulling down on the forward left webs. The instructor on the ground was kind enough to call out, "Nice position, Number Five," but it was distinctly windy. You could not feel at all sure whether you would land forward or backwards. It is possible to control the pendulum swing up to a point, but not entirely, especially when you aren't experienced. You can control it up to the last second, but there is always the chance of being carried up by a sudden small gust of wind and banged down on the ground. This is the point at which you need all your training. It is impossible to

evolve a conscious plan. At the last second I didn't know how I was going to land, and I did so with a feeling of much more hardness than on the gymnasium mattresses. As I hit the ground I felt a considerable sensation of impact all through my body, and I thought I must have hurt myself, but it was immediately obvious that I hadn't. The 'chute started dragging me forward. I turned over as instructed and collapsed it by pulling on the under-straps.

I ran to the instructor, who said, "Nice exit. Landed sideways left." A rhapsody which was interrupted by the Syndicate Sergeant, who came up and said that I had landed without turning my feet to forty-five degrees; instead of rolling over sideways I had almost pitched forward.



He pointed to my trousers in confirmation: they were soaked in mud. "Handled it well, mind you," he said; "don't change it. Credit him with a side left. Nasty wind. If you lads can land in that you can land in anything you're likely to get."

We drove back in serene anticipation of a leisurely lunch. Unfortunately there was no lunch. We had not been expected to make two jumps, and a late lunch had not been ordered. So we had to be content with a rough improvisation. In any case, we had to be back on parade at 2.15. There wasn't any half holiday.

We waited in the stand-by room, then we were called into a lecture room, where Flight-Lieutenant Murphy made one of his celebrated roll-calls and gave a short address to the effect that matters had passed off quite well. We were now to have air experience. This simply meant going for a short flip in a bomber. Of course, most of them had never been in an aeroplane before. This seemed to make their resolution to jump all the more remarkable.

The jumping-hole takes up the whole width of the 'plane. It looks about four feet in diameter. In flight it is covered by two semicircular trapdoors which are raised on approach to the dropping-zone. For this flight they were kept open. We had to lie prone and study the ground sailing by about 1000 feet beneath. Whether this was meant to raise our confidence or test our resolution I couldn't quite follow. As a matter of fact the ground looks much more friendly and receptive when you are moving over it than when you are moored over it. The doll's-house quality of the houses makes the idea of jumping into such a toy world almost inviting, especially when there is no immediate possibility of doing it.

Conversation in the mess at tea-time now took on an expert turn, especially before the new arrivals of the next Course, who listened to our reminiscences with carefully concealed apprehension. The prospect of

dropping again the next morning made me rather shaky in the evening, but in a steadier way. I don't think you ever get over the apprehension about jumping, but—like any other emotion—when it becomes familiar you can deal with it.

*Tuesday.*

We jumped through the aperture once and then had a lecture from Flight-Lieutenant Murphy on the approaching first jump from an aircraft.

"As soon as you're airborne, reach up and pull down so that your hands are level with your eyes. Pull down and push out. . . . There's nothing to worry about in jumping from an aircraft; it's a nicer experience, I think, than a balloon."

He went on for a bit on these lines, then we were left waiting. Our corporal, who was sitting next to me, said: "Your first exit was very good—much better than you did on the synthetic. I think you were a bit lazy on the ground training." I wearily denied the suggestion, because it was one which has pursued me in any course of instruction in any subject which I have ever undertaken. You can imagine that, in this particular case, I was sincerely concerned to be successfully trained and to grasp every detail of technique as thoroughly as my capacity would allow. I had worked very hard, but it was still the same old reaction. Disappointing.

One man asked a question: "How do we get out of the 'chute on landing?"

Murphy looked at him a little disappointedly, as this had been one of the subjects of the curriculum. "First undo one leg strap, then the second. Get one arm out of the harness and do the Hitler salute with the other, and the parachute blows away."

We drew 'chutes at 9.30 a.m. and fitted them with already familiar routine. The corporal said: "Now, there's plenty of time for jumping. You're only doing slow pairs. There's only two of you have to jump, each time the aircraft circles the dropping-zone. So there's plenty of time, but don't hang about. There's plenty of time, but don't waste it."

We waited, reclining on the mats outside the stand-by room, from which organ music was coming. The new arrivals were being introduced to the swings. We watched them with tolerant contempt. Presently we went into the stand-by room. In a way people were more jittery than they had been before the first jump. I was reassured to see this because I felt more jittery myself, though, at the same time, more sure of my ability to do the necessary thing. We waited for a long time and then our Section, C.4, was called for. We paraded outside the hangar, numbered off, and were marched out across the tarmac. It was a minor relief to be on the way. But we were not on the way for long. Half way across the tarmac the corporal shouted, "About turn!" and we marched back to the stand-by room. Jumping had been cancelled because of the rising wind. We did some jumps through the aperture and then went to dinner. I was feeling rather down. I thought this was due to the strain and the reaction.

After dinner we practised jumping out of the fuselage and the apertures in sections of five. All the time you have to speed up your rate of exit. There mustn't be any sign of hesitation between one man's

jump and the next. The idea is a smooth flow of men falling. We were introduced to the American idea of jumping out of a door in the side, instead of a hole in the floor. There was a fuselage of one of these Douglas aircraft which are much roomier and more comfortable inside. For one thing you have a seat to sit on, and it holds about double the number of men. When the time comes to jump out, you all stand up and get in a queue, pressed very close together, so that once the process of jumping starts, *the men at the back edge the others forward in a sort of caterpillar motion.*

We fitted on practice 'chutes and marched out to an aircraft to practise hitching up our static lines to the corresponding apparatus in the plane. I was feeling dreadful. Distinctly apprehensive of having a temperature. We went back to the standby-room and I was glad to lie down on the floor. Directly after tea I half undressed and went to bed, still uncertain as to whether I was ill or not, but blissfully relieved to be in bed. My room-mate was himself suffering from a bad throat, which presently one of the doctors on the Course came in to examine. Seeing me in bed, he went off to borrow a thermometer, and presently told me that my temperature was over 100. I was not anxious to report officially because it seemed to me that, having started on the Course, it would have been even more nerve-racking to interrupt it than to continue it. But the doctor had no equipment of his own with him, and anyway said he was going to call in the R.A.F. doctor.

Squadron-Leader Goldberg came to see me later on and again in the morning, when he told me that my temperature had been 102 last evening and was no better this morning. Half way through the morning he called for me in an ambulance and I was driven out, together with a sick W.A.A.F. and an aircraftman, to the medical quarters, about three miles away. This was a requisitioned house. I was taken upstairs and shared a room with a young Lieutenant in the South Staffs, who was suffering from light concussion, incurred on the first balloon jump. *It was a pleasant room with a frieze showing parachutists having all sorts of accidents, contributed by Major Ian Fenwick, the cartoonist, who had recently been in with an injured leg.* By an altogether unlooked-for and happy surprise our nurse turned out to be strikingly like Veronica Lake, and as if this weren't enough, she was a very efficient nurse. But I still felt dreadful.

She took my temperature in the evening, and when I asked how it was, she said, "It might be worse, but it might be better," from which I gathered that it was rising instead of falling. I therefore took the initiative, and had myself swathed in so many blankets that it was difficult to support their weight, and set about trying to sweat it out. At 10 p.m. I had long been bathed in sweat and they gave me a bed-bath. They also took my temperature and told me that it was down to 102 from 104, which it had been at six o'clock. Next morning it was normal. There were seven of our platoon suffering from the same thing; presumably we had all caught it from Guardsman M.

They kept coming in to see me and were all very impatient to get back to the matter in hand and get it over with. I got up for two hours in the evening and was discharged the following morning, though feeling very shaky. After lunch Murphy rang up and asked if I was fit to jump

in the afternoon. Having just had some strengthening whisky, I consented to this project, collected a 'chute, and found the section. Gunner Wall, who had also been in hospital, paraded next to me. We both found it difficult to co-ordinate enough to keep in step. It was like stilt-walking. Odd how anxious one is to have the corporal examine the parachute, though goodness knows what good such a superficial examination can be. In the absence of Guardsman M. we had a newcomer to the section in the shape of Major Fenwick. He had already done a short parachuting Course and was now doing the long one. We had strange dispatchers for this jump (dispatchers are the men who tell you when to go).

One was young with ginger hair, the other was bulky with a very loud voice. I felt a bit anxious about not having our own corporal. You develop a lot of confidence in your own instructor.

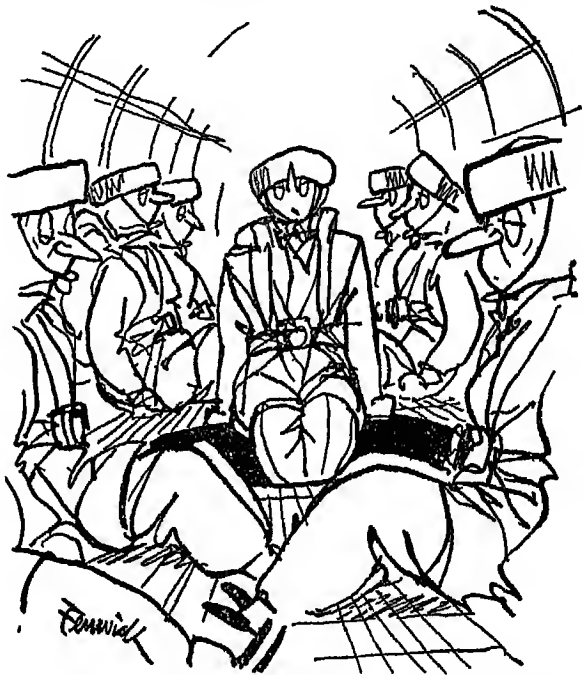
Fenwick and I sat next to each other in the 'plane. His composure was noteworthy, and I found that my own debilitated condition, far from lowering my confidence, did a good deal to dispel nervous apprehension, and induce a helpful sense of fatalism.

"How many funny cartoons can you think of now, Major Fenwick?" I shouted, as we began to fly through the air.

"Plenty," he said loftily.

We circled the dropping-zone twice owing to some delay. Once the aircraft takes off there are only very few minutes before jumping starts. The journey, which takes a good half-hour by bus, only takes three or four minutes by air. The trapdoors are closed and you all sit forward of them for the take-off. As soon as the aircraft is airborne, you get into position and hook up your static line to the hooks on the aircraft. You sit back against the wall and the hook is over your shoulder. At the last moment the instructor goes round examining each man. It becomes a matter of extreme urgency to have him look at your connection and say that it is all right.

The trapdoors were open and the order "Running up" was given.



The first five sat forward, bunching themselves up and pressing a little against the man in front. The small red light went on over the hole and the instructor shouted "Action Stations, Number One!" Almost immediately the green light flashed on and he shouted "Go!" Then "Two, three, four and five", and they were all gone. One of them put up his hands, hoping to save himself from banging against the opposite side of the hole which is, of course, much more likely to result in banging yourself, and the rest of us shook our heads. I was wondering if I would be strong enough to be able to project myself out and, in fact, I seemed to fall out. I went into a somersault. Got my feet caught in the rigging lines, and then disentangled.

You are tremendously blown about as you come out of the aircraft just for the second while you are falling clear of the slipstream. There is not the same panic feeling as in the balloon jump, because there isn't so far to fall before the parachute develops.

I managed to hold myself in the proper position and landed side left. I was dragged along a bit but felt very pleased with myself at not being damaged. I ran up to Murphy, who directed me to the sergeant, who said: "Medium exit; somersaulted, you know. Rest quite all right." I still felt a bit groggy, but after a few minutes somehow felt increasingly stronger, not to mention extremely pleased with myself. This time I really did enjoy the cup of tea in the Y.M.C.A.

In the bus on the way back I sat next to a man who said he had worked at the War Office.

"Oh yes, what branch?"

It turned out that he had been a prisoners' escort, taking convicted soldiers to and from prison and detention camps. They had to make three trips a week or two to Scotland. He said they didn't have much trouble, though some men got very shaky when approaching gaol. It was necessary to watch men closely when escorting them back from prison to their unit, as they were most likely to feel like breaking out at that time. Of course, they were given the men's conduct reports before they started, so that they knew what sort of customer they had. He was full of admiration for Scotsmen, who apparently made admirable prisoners.

### *Saturday.*

Arriving late I found the Syndicate in the middle of a lecture by Flight-Lieutenant Murphy, who was criticizing everyone's performance. As I came into the room he was saying: "Major Cotterell. Medium exit; somersault; side left landing." After he had criticized everybody in this way, some in more detail than others, we went for some stick drill in preparation for our first stick of ten, i.e. all ten jumping out one after the other. Major Fenwick had now joined our Section. He is an enormous man of slightly horsey mien. His height is naturally no help in dropping through the hole, or landing on the ground. It is very difficult for him to roll up into a cosy human ball as prescribed.

The morning was riddled with rumours as to whether or not we were to jump before lunch, after lunch, or not until tomorrow. The weather is one governing factor, and the available supply of parachutes is another

After break there was more stick drill from 10.25 a.m. till 11.20 a.m., and then we were dismissed for lunch. The timetable was naturally beginning to go rather to pieces. We had had all our training and it was simply a question of waiting for the weather. The amount of corrective training you can do is limited, especially as I imagine there must be a considerable tendency to get stale as well as overtired. We were all beginning to feel very tired.

In the afternoon we were marched across into the stand-by room, and after a considerable wait we fitted 'chutes. Major Fenwick was not with us. He was a great man for disappearing. We didn't really feel that he was involved to the same degree as other people. His air of detachment placed him in a little world of his own. Apparently I am average size, because there hadn't so far been any need for me to adjust any parachute with which I had been issued, though this afternoon it was rather too tight, so that it was necessary to loosen the leg straps.

As we marched out to the 'plane, I said to K.: "Do you think this gets worse or better?"

"I should think it takes a long time before you get used to it," he said.

About the most discouraging feature of emplaning is the high wind of the slipstream. It tears past you with vicious violence as you queue up to get into the aircraft. There is a little wooden ladder which you climb and you have to bend double to get in the door, which is in the left side at the back. You have to make allowance for the bulk of the parachute, which bangs against the roof so that you have to crawl to your place in the aircraft. We had to wait a minute or two before the aircraft took off.

"Each time I go through that hole I amaze myself," said Private P., who was sitting facing me.

"Now, we want perfect exits, eh?" said Corporal Haynes, making a gesture expressing confidence with his finger and thumb. I looked at the time; it was about 3 p.m., I think, but it was difficult to remember. The aircraft took off, we hooked up, and the men sitting just in front and just behind the hole opened the trapdoors. We were just passing over the cemetery. "Look, see the funeral down there? No doubt one of ours; they do you very nicely," said the corporal whimsically. He continued talking to the pilot over the intercom. Presently he shouted, "Running up." We all edged forward and bunched together. "Action Stations, Number One—Go! Two, three, four, five." It was then my turn. When Number Five jumps he automatically releases the equipment containers, which drop on either side of Number Six, and possibly make a sandwich of him if he doesn't obey regulations and shout "Container, container, container" before he jumps. The thing is that the pause must be well timed. It mustn't be exaggerated, otherwise the aircraft will have passed off the dropping-zone, and in the case of operations the stick would drop dangerously scattered, while in the case of training the last two or three men are liable to drop in the lake or somewhere else. I burbled my lines incoherently. "'Tainer, 'tainer, 'tainer', I said, like a man about to faint, and was away. I seemed to somersault again, but on recollection I don't think I did; it wasn't quite the same feeling as the last time. Inevitably you go through some of the motions

of somersaulting, but if you hold yourself to attention and come out in a straight line you probably don't do a complete one. The danger of somersaulting is that you are liable to get your feet caught in the rigging lines. Almost invariably your feet fall out again all right. But there is just the outside chance that it may interfere with your flight. We were supposed to look round to know the relative positions of the other parachutists, but I had only the vaguest impression of seeing them. I came down all right and landed side left. A man who had landed in another section just before ours pointed to the containers, which were only a few yards away.

"You couldn't have come much closer, sir," he said.

"How did I land?" I asked him.

"Feet a bit apart, sir," he said. It depressed me unduly.

As Number Six, I had to rally the others to the containers. They came running up from two directions, except G., who had got carried some way. Midwood, the Course Commander, was standing close by. "Good stick, came out well," he said. We then did all-round defence drill so badly that we were sent away to practise and report back to do it again.

Coming back in the bus I found I had a slight headache, particularly in the eyes. J. told me he had the same thing yesterday. While we were waiting for tea, Murphy came up and said I could do two jumps this evening if I felt up to it. We were to parade at 5.30. Immediately you are given the concrete orders for a jump you feel the same sort of tinge of excitement which you get when the guns start going off in an air raid. We had tea; you eat all right, but the prospect doesn't exactly help the meal. I took two aspirins and two parachutes and we drove out in the bus. I went up in the first balloon with Sergeant C. and three others who had also fallen behind with their jumps and were catching up on them. It was a calm evening, with dusk just coming on. I jumped Number Four. It was the most enjoyable jump I had had so far. I felt perfectly at home, and landed very comfortably. I packed my 'chute, carried it over to the lorry, and feeling like some sort of yo-yo donned another one. This time I was dispatched by the same sergeant as before and jumped Number Three. It was now dark. They say you feel perfectly confident when you have jumped and that if you make another jump right away you don't experience the usual apprehension. This isn't quite so. There is always a modicum of nervous response to the idea of launching yourself into the air.

"Let's have a song, shall we?" said the sergeant as the balloon careered up into the darkness. There was no answer.

"Who is the intruder? Well, if it isn't the Major!" he said, monologuing his way along. I was in no mood to reciprocate this banter. "What's your number?" I said to the man in front, feeling a sudden anxiety that I might respond to the wrong number and jump simultaneously with another man. They say that each parachute jump is equivalent to eight hours' work in point of the nervous fatigue entailed, and I was afraid I might find some difficulty in going through the motions, but I jumped all right. It was a bit of an effort to pull the forward rigging lines into something like the correct position. I was beginning to feel dreadfully tired, but I landed with my legs and feet well together,

so that, though I was jarred a bit all over my body, I didn't feel it at all in my legs. It is astonishing what an effect is produced by having your legs together.

Just as I was packing my 'chute a man landed slap on my rigging. "Good landing," I said, having watched him. He didn't move. I called to him, but there was no reply. He lay there quite still. I went over to him and saw that he was completely out, lying there with his hands raised as if he was dog-paddling. I shouted at him and shook him, but he made no response. I shouted for the instructors, but they didn't hear me, so I ran up to them and said, "I've got a stiff over here."

"Oh, damnation!" said the Syndicate Officer. He came back with me and one of the sergeants, who bent over the boy and said: "Ah, he's fine. Just a bit of concussion. He's the best boy in my section, isn't he? Aren't you? Perfect landing he made. Wonderful jump. Never seen such a jump. What's your name?" The boy was beginning to come round.

"Johnnie," he said, faintly.

"Johnnie, eh? Ah, he's a fine boy, knows his name," said the instructor triumphantly. "Nothing much the matter with him if he knows his name. What's your second name?"

"Just Johnnie," whispered the boy, as if in the last stages of love-sickness.

"No, your second name," said the Flight-Lieutenant.

"Just Johnnie," repeated the unfortunate young man. This is apparently the normal symptom of concussion. You don't know where you are or what has happened, and you have no idea of having jumped.

Presently the man said his name was Winston. Apparently his name was Winston, but we thought he was being facetious. "Rub his hands," said the Syndicate Officer. We both rubbed him.

"What a damned nuisance," said the Syndicate Officer sorrowfully. "Can you get him up? Help his circulation if you can get him up." He took off his flying-coat and wrapped it round the boy's shoulders. The ambulance came up and Johnnie climbed in. I couldn't understand how he had come to any harm; he seemed to have landed perfectly all right. The sergeant said he had probably landed stiffly on his legs, instead of rolling over directly he touched the ground. The consequent shock was liable to produce concussion.

### *Sunday.*

The trouble with this place is that one day is no different from the others, but, of course, by now we are so anxious to complete the Course and go on leave that most people are willing to work all night as well.

We spent some of the morning packing containers. These are black metal cylinders, about six feet long and about eighteen inches in diameter. They open out in two halves, secured by a metal cradle and bound together by a sort of tin chain. Having loaded them with our packs and rifles, we put them on to the ground-level buggies, and pulled them to a truck ready to be taken out and loaded on to the aircraft. We did some stick drill with Sergeant C. as Stick Commander, i.e. the man who has to watch the lights and order the jumping. At ten o'clock there was a lecture by Murphy.

"Any hard landings on the night balloon?"

"Didn't know we was landing. Can't tell in the darkness," said one man.

"That's the interesting part," said Flight-Lieutenant Murphy. "Now, your morale is good and I'm pleased with you. Yes, definitely pleased. Now, when you jump this afternoon, I want you to get that lift web buckle well forward. Have your harnesses a bit looser than you have been having them so that you have got a slacker seat, and slip your way out of the seat in flight. I'm going to stop-watch you this time. I want to see you come out one, two, three, four—just like that. But I'm not out just for speed. I'd sooner have a good jump at a reasonable rate. Right you are, see you this afternoon."

"Sir, we'll have to walk back to Camp. It's too far to walk to Camp in the time," said a man at the back.

Murphy looked at him. "Why, certainly. I'll lay on transport. It must be nearly half a mile," he said. He took a look round the audience. "Well, here they are—Britain's paratroops. Intelligent and tough, that's what they say you are: intelligent and tough. And it's too far to walk to Camp. Thank Christ for the A.R.P!"

We paraded at 1.30 p.m., drew 'chutes, fitted them and marched out to load the containers into the bomb-racks. It wasn't much fun. The containers weigh about 300 lbs., and you have to push them up above the level of your head into the bomb-rack, where some R.A.F. technicians attach them.

We went back for the usual hanging about. Sergeant C. was Number Four of the stick, and was giving the jumping orders as he would in a proper operation. Private G., who was jumping Number One, didn't like the idea of being shouted off by anyone but the instructor. Absurd, of course, but understandable. On the face of it, there isn't much that can go wrong, but you suffer from a passionate desire to eliminate any possibility of upset.

I dropped Number Six, just behind the containers, and saw them falling down in front of me. I landed all right, but for the first time felt a mild strain in the right leg. I ran to one of the containers, opened it, took a dummy Bren gun from it, and we went through the motions of deployment. I forgot to mention one thing which was rather funny at the time. It is considered a disgrace to 'ring the bell'—that is, to bang your head on the opposite side of the hole as you jump out. The point is that it almost invariably indicates a last-minute tinge of, shall we say, diffidence. As I was undoing my 'chute, Clarkson, the second in command of the Course, came running, cursing and bleeding, by me. He had committed the unforgivable sin. The expert had 'rung the bell'. It upset him psychologically for several days afterwards. The only casualty of the afternoon was a man bitten by a wasp, a process which I had the good fortune to observe and only narrowly escaped myself. We drove back and paraded in the lecture room.

Flight-Lieutenant Murphy succumbed once more to the temptation to read out our names, and in response we had to shout the number of jumps we had made to date.

"Jumping today was very good. You progressed from the last stick, and so it should be, but you have a long way to go before you

are right ahead. Now, there's one more jump to go. In your next jump, if you do any better than this one this afternoon, your report will be better than average. You have been doing very good stick-jumping. Mind you, there was some ropy stuff, but on the whole not bad at all." He then read aloud the reports of individual jumps for the afternoon. For instance, our section went as follows:

"C.4. Number One, good; two, very good; three, very good; four, very good; five, very good; six, good; seven, good; eight, good; nine, good; ten, good. It wasn't a very fast stick, but it was pleasing to watch. Time: 14.4 seconds. The best one was 10½ seconds. That was a very good time indeed; we haven't had a better time for several months." One stick had taken seventeen seconds.

"What happened to that stick?"

"Got feet caught in the strop," said the stick instructor despondently. The instructors take the progress of their sections very much to heart. There is quite a competitive spirit between them.

"What number?"

"Number Two, sir."

"What, Number Two! And you got caught in a strop? How the hell can Number Two get caught in a strop?"

"I think I have got big feet, sir," said the man.

"Ask Major Fenwick about big feet. Did you ever get caught in a strop, Major Fenwick?"

"No," said Major Fenwick.

"His feet are twice as big as yours," said the Flight-Lieutenant. "Now, the whole lot of you are no better than the average Syndicate, yet. Tomorrow I want to see you get out quicker, press into the man in front, and really produce results."

At the end of the day I was feeling pretty fundamentally tired. Everyone else seemed to be the same. The general atmosphere of continuous strain does catch up on you.

### *Monday.*

The end-of-term exams were now on hand. Assuming only that the weather was satisfactory—and this was a substantial assumption—we were to do our last jump today. We were to drop by platoons—that is to say, three 'plane-loads at a time—run to the containers, collect our weapons and launch an attack on a bridge some three miles away. We were briefed for this task by Captain Midwood, who emphasized that in a proper parachute operation the briefing might last for months. You had to be in such a pitch of training that if you asked a man where he was supposed to be twenty minutes after dropping, he could give you the answer, tell you where everyone else should be, and also explain what he proposed to do if he found himself in the wrong place. If you asked a man what the second password was and he said he didn't know, that man should be out of the operation. The officers were taken to see a ground plan of the piece of countryside over which we were to operate during the afternoon. Most of the morning was spent in hanging about.

We drew 'chutes after lunch, emplaned at 3.10. Standing on the tarmac outside the hangar waiting for our 'chutes to be inspected, we

could see the early jumpers dropping a few miles away. I think the further you are away, the longer the parachute seems to linger. From where we stood it seemed an improbably spectacular operation. Looking round our little group, it seemed most unlikely that we should in a few minutes be putting on a similar display.

We dropped at approximately 3.18 p.m. This was the eighth time we had jumped. I don't think I felt particularly more or less confident during the magic moment of running up. We had been told to think of the jump simply as a preliminary to the exercise, and not as more important; certainly it does help to regard the jump as a means of getting where you want to go, but it doesn't help all that much. Quite a few of us felt an added tinge of apprehension because it was the last jump. The idea of being crocked on the last jump seemed peculiarly maddening. We had by this time developed a considerable stick spirit. Knowing what you go through yourself gives you considerable respect for the other men who are going through the same thing. There is the same sort of harmony which you find in a bomber crew. On the other hand, to offset the extra tinge of apprehension there was the feeling that all you had to do was to fall out of that hole somehow and survive the landing to qualify as a parachutist. Several people apparently felt encouraged by this idea, and I did myself.

Anyway, I dropped in reasonable order. It was a wonderful day, and I made easily my best landing so far. Instead of handing over to the subconscious during the last few feet to the ground, I was fully conscious of which side I meant to roll, and as I somersaulted over I was filled with a delightful and almost professional exultation at having done the thing well. Incidentally the sight of thirty parachutists and their containers dropping simultaneously is confusingly impressive. You would be very likely to think there were at least three times as many.

As soon as we landed we had to form up as a section deployed for all-round defence, and make for the rendezvous point in some woods several hundred yards away. Our section was commanded by Sergeant C. Personally I was a Bren gunner, and Fenwick was a rifleman. We marched, doubled, halted and crouched our way along the muddy banks of a stream for some three miles, while the staff of the Airborne Depot Battle School bombarded us with thunder-flashes and other delights. Our section's role was to hold the enemy's attention with fire while the other two sections assaulted the bridge. We came in for a good deal of criticism from the Battle School instructors, who said that we were not properly under cover, and wouldn't accept Major Fenwick's heated rejoinder that neither were the enemy forces which he himself, let alone the rest of us, had already annihilated. The instructors expressed their displeasure by standing on top of the bank behind which we were crouched, and projecting an extravagant number of thunder-flashes all round us. I hadn't taken part in an infantry scheme for some time, but it was all reassuringly familiar. We floundered in the mud and wondered what was happening in just the same old way. Presently we were declared to have captured the bridge and made our back way to the road where the buses were waiting. Walking along, Fenwick and I came across Sergeant C., who was dripping blood in all directions. He had been wearing his

special parachuting glasses. I suppose he had not been wearing them properly, because they had bounced off, jerked up and tried to guillotine him during the jump. He had to have several stitches put in the wound. Incidentally, we had jumped for the first time in steel helmets. Although I fixed mine as tightly as I could, the force of the slipstream presumably jerked it loose and landed it down over my eyes. We learned that there had been another casualty. It was P., one of the men who had 'flu when I did; he had landed in a tree. Surprisingly enough, it is usually quite comfortable to land in a tree, and you simply wait, suspended, until rescued, if you can't make your own way down. But P. had the misfortune to fall twenty feet and injure his back.

The end-of-term feeling was now complete; everyone was very tired and extremely happy.

### *Tuesday.*

We paraded luxuriously late and marched across for a final talk from Flight-Lieutenant Murphy. "Good morning, parachutists," he said, and took the final opportunity to call our roll.

"So far as the jump yesterday was concerned it was quite pleasing to watch. You didn't show any speed, but I was quite content. Your flight was more intelligent than usual, though I didn't see many people turning to get their bearings before landing. Landings were above average. Movement on the ground appeared quite organized. You may have thought it a shambles, but to the spectator it was quite coherent."

He said our report as a Syndicate would be a pretty good one.

"Three packed the job in during the Course, but just because a man refuses to jump, don't think it means that he hasn't got guts. We had a man here the other day who had baled out over Brest from a bomber, and he wouldn't even go off the Fan. We had another man who won the M.C. at Dunkirk, and he refused too at the last moment.

"Well, I'll say good-bye. You may find there is a certain amount of reaction after this Course. A good many of you may be suffering from scoliosis, which means a slightly twisted spine. Don't take any notice; just get the left-hand seat in a bus or a train and it will wear off in a week or two.

"Well, I'll say good-bye and wish you many happy landings."

We marched over for the passing-out parade, which was held in the cinema. Dance music was playing as on the first day, and we were each handed a small metal replica of a parachute in flight, presented to us as a souvenir by the manufacturers of the Irving parachute. We were shown a newsreel film about parachuting which had been made at the school. It showed the training and the final scheme with a running commentary about the tough and terrible troops of the skies, which was greeted by sustained applause and ironical cheering.

The Wing Commander made a short speech and handed over the boxful of parachuting badges to Fenwick, who spoke in return.

We paraded outside on the square and each man was given his wings. Everyone went off for a fortnight's jumping leave, financially reinforced to the extent of £1, the first instalment of their 2s. a day danger money.

I went and had a talk with Murphy, to get some material for the pamphlet which I had to write about the Course. He was making out his

report on the Syndicate. The injuries in the Syndicate had been as follows: During the ground training there had been one slightly bruised sacrum; a man had landed awkwardly on his back from the mock aperture, but was back to duty in two days. From the first balloon a man had bruised his sacrum by landing in a sitting position. On the night balloon a man had landed with all his weight on one foot and cracked his tibia, and then there had been the case of P. falling from the tree.

The Syndicate Officers have to make a most detailed report, both general and individual. He was writing that discipline had been quite good and the general standard very satisfactory. Quality of exits had been very good in the final descent, but the sticks were not fast. He showed me the report which my section instructor had made on me. It said that I was an "average jumper, quiet but confident. He is much better in aircraft than on ground training. Good and confident in aircraft. A quiet, intelligent type."

Music. Curtain.



## DID I EVER TELL YOU ABOUT MY OPERATION?

I WAS GIVEN PERMISSION TO FLY ON AN R.A.F. RAID. ON THE WAY FROM the railway station to the bomber station we came across a mysterious white something drawn across the road. It was a parachute. Only a few minutes before my companion had remarked that it was a ghost-train sort of night, and with the wind and rain driving across the Lincolnshire fens it was alarmingly like an illustration from a spy thriller. There didn't seem to be anybody on the end of the parachute, which had got entangled in the hedge. Just as we were getting thoroughly soaked the parachutist appeared wearing a flying helmet and a civilian overcoat. He was an American airman, one of the crew of a U.S. Navy Liberator which had been forced to bale out through lack of petrol. The Flight-Lieutenant asked him what time he had baled out, how many others had baled out, and what kind of aircraft they had baled out of. The airman, whose name was Clark, said that he was the tail gunner; he had baled out at about 5,000 feet; and there had been ten others in the aircraft; one of them had been injudicious enough to open his parachute before jumping: he had jumped with an armful of canopy and a ripe prospect of disaster. "She was a good ship. Pity to have to throw her

away," said Clark. He didn't have much to say except when the conversation drifted away from his recent experience, when he switched it firmly back, and told us how he had kept from pulling the cord as long as possible, had been dragged a long way when he landed and had lost his boots. We stopped the car at the next 'phone box to ring up and institute a search party for the others. Certainly it solved the problem of what to talk about on arrival at the bomber station mess. This was very comfortably situated in a requisitioned hotel. We got there about 10 p.m. and were given bacon and eggs. The sleeping quarters were admirably luxurious. There was a bathroom attached to each bedroom.

The next day, Sunday, was my birthday. I was called at 8.15 and found that my room-mate was a tough little man who told me that he was starting his second tour of operations today as rear gunner to the new Wing Commander. He didn't expect to survive this second tour, which, he thought, on looking out of the window at the relatively clear sky, might very possibly start tonight. He told me that Sunday was just like any other day. The lateness in rising was habitual; there was a bus at 9 a.m. to take the crews from the mess to the aerodrome. My conductor, the Flight-Lieutenant, appeared as I was finishing breakfast and afterwards asked me to sign a form which instituted the following legal position:

"No compensation will be paid by the Air Council or by any officer or airman, R.A.F., in respect of any such loss or injury. I agree to so bind myself, my heirs, executors and administrators as to indemnify the Air Council and any officer or airman, R.A.F., and any person in the service of the Crown, against any claim which may be made by any third party against them or any of them arising out of any act or default on my part, during or in connection with the said flight." We then drove round to the airfield. I was taken in to meet the Wing Commander, a tall, thin young man just returned from the Middle East, and about to start his first operational tour with Bomber Command. I was subsequently introduced to the Group Captain. I went back and spent the rest of the morning in the Adjutant's office except for a brief excursion to the flying control room, where they control the traffic of aircraft landing or taking off from the airfield. After lunch I was taken into the Squadron-Leader's office and introduced to the pilots.

The Squadron-Leader was a very young D.F.C. with the attractive air of decision induced by being a young Squadron-Leader with the D.F.C. He sat behind a table; it was a very small room, with a coke-stove in one corner, one easy chair, and along one of the walls a chart showing the aircraft state and photographs of the crews. There were half a dozen pilots in the room. I was introduced to the one who had been selected as my escort. He looked even younger than the others. His name was Knights. He took me to draw a parachute and then with the rest of the crew we were taken out in a crew bus to the aircraft T for Tommy. The rest of the crew were similarly young. The aircraft was a Lancaster. It didn't look sensationally large despite its sensationally large bomb load. The pilot Knights showed me round it and indicated where I would stand for the operation, while the rest of the crew cleaned it. Apparently a pilot had to pay a half-crown fine if the Squadron-Leader found any uncleaned portion of the aircraft. We weren't there for long, as we had to be back at 4 p.m. for a post-mortem discussion on the last

Berlin raid, which had taken place a few days before. It was held in the briefing-room, which was about the size of a small Church Hall, with a table and forms for each crew. The Group Captain conducted the meeting. Apparently it was the first of the kind held on this station. He explained that after each operation the report and photographs brought back by each crew were individually considered. He hoped that if the post-mortems were held in the presence of all concerned very useful lessons might be learned. It might help to counteract the tendency to think you knew a thing when you weren't really sure. But criticism was to be constructive, not destructive. "When I ask why were you twenty miles off track, I don't mean why the hell were you twenty miles off track, I just mean why were you twenty miles off track." The various specialist officers, Intelligence, Radio, Ordnance etc., and the two Squadron-Leaders and the Wing Commander sat on each side of him. The Group Captain sat alone at a small table raised on a shallow platform. He had a pile of dossiers before him, one relating to each crew. He took these in turn.

"Tomlin came back with two engines U/S and a third likely to go. Very good performance. Now the point is this—he asked for radio priority and he couldn't get it because another aircraft already had priority. Now, was it really necessary for the other aircraft to have priority, and why was it necessary?"

The navigator of the crew concerned stood up and said that they had become uncertain of their whereabouts because he, the navigator, had been attending to another member of the crew who was unconscious through oxygen failure. The Group Captain went into the question of why there had been an oxygen failure. He prescribed a revised and tightened-up arrangement for inspecting each man's oxygen mask before taking off.

One crew had complained that the door of the aircraft had blown open. The room became divided into two schools: those who maintained the official view that it was mechanically impossible for the door to blow open, and those with experience of doors inclined to blowing open.

T for Tommy, Knights' aircraft, was the last to be considered. There was laughter in the post-mortem when the Group Captain read out that Knights had bombed on the reciprocal, i.e. had turned and made a second run up flying in the opposite direction to the main stream of bombers. It was considered very funny. "I don't know what to say to you," said the Group-Captain. "Don't know quite what to say. Yes, I think you were justified. After all, you achieved your primary object. Dropped the bombs on the target. Yes, I think you were justified. Very creditable."

The rest of the day was our own.

The crews don't know whether or not there will be an operation on any given day until about 10 a.m. Next morning the pilots were hanging round the Squadron-Leader's office in the same way as yesterday. Nothing definite had come in by 10 o'clock, when we went out to the aircraft, though the weather was considered ominously suitable. Accumulators were being charged out in the aircraft, the radio was being tested. A girl's voice said, "I hear you strong and clear," "I hear you strong and clear."

Discipline was loose but definite. Or rather there didn't have to be any. The sense of interdependence between various members of the

crew was complete. They all looked to the pilot for guidance. Each one was conscious of his own important part in the crew. Apart from the pilot the outstanding character was the tail gunner, who was referred to as 'the old man' or 'Dad' because of his pessimistic and hypochondriac tendencies. Apparently Dad was inclined to be an alarmist, to see fighters in a clear sky. But this increased the general confidence in him as a tail gunner. They were convinced that no fighter could possibly catch Dad napping.

"Look at this, that's ominous," said Knights. A 4,000-lb. bomb was being towed up to the aircraft on a ground-level buggy. The engines were given a ground run. There was a sense of pleasurable excitement as they started up one by one. The compartment warmed up very quickly. A new zest was detectable as it became evident that there was going to be an operation tonight. The sense of adventure was infectious. You felt that you were taking life by the throat and shaking it.

After a cup of tea at the Y.M.C.A. mobile van we drove back to the mess for lunch at noon. My room-mate was changing. He put a small German dictionary in his pocket. "Come in handy in the Stalag," he said.

There was an atmosphere of quietly mounting excitement at lunch. People's minds were obviously slightly ahead of the current meal. Certainly mine was. Someone asked me to pass the parsnips, and I said "Yes, thanks, I will," and helped myself to some instead.

Pilots were to be briefed at 1 p.m. We sat around on wicker chairs and forms in a small room just off the main briefing-room. The windows looked out over the airfield, but the aircraft were too dispersed to be visible. This room was the Intelligence Library. It was covered with training pamphlets and Intelligence reports. We were still waiting at 1.35 p.m. The pilots were discussing possible destinations.

"I hope those sons of bitches aren't sitting there waiting for us," said one pilot, and Knights said, "They're sitting in their cockpits having cups of tea brought to them, just sitting there waiting for you."

It was decided that it wasn't likely to be Berlin, because the petrol load wasn't large enough. They discussed the characteristics of the new Wing Commander in briefing.

"I used to like the way Abercrombie briefed," said one. "Made you feel you'd won the war before you got up in the air."

"I never enthused," said his neighbour.

Eventually the target map was brought in and unveiled. Cords marked the route to and from the target. It was Frankfurt, in south-west Germany. "I hate that name," said Knights. "Biggest concentration of searchlights you ever saw."

Roll-call was then taken. The Group Captain came in and sat up on a table.

"Met., will you give your story?" said the Wing Commander. The Meteorological Officer started his technical monologue illustrated by a large and complicated cloud diagram. It didn't mean much to me. "No front definitely affecting your route . . . bases should be O.K. to land all night . . ." and so on.

The Intelligence Officer described Frankfurt. Population about 570,000, a very important town; a commercial and financial centre, with very vital railway ramifications, also of considerable importance as

an industrial centre. The docks had been badly damaged some weeks before.

The pilots had each been issued with a map of the target area set in a map-case, on the back of which there was a space marked off under various headings for them to make notes. The Wing Commander said that there would be several hundred aircraft on the raid (he gave the exact figure). The attack would be in five waves. He read out which aircraft would be in the various waves.

He went on to give particulars of the petrol load, the bomb load, and the overall, or all-up weight of the aircraft. One of these aircraft weighs as much as a small convoy of motor lorries.

"You'll set course over base at 1750 hours. Must be comfortable at your height shortly before crossing the enemy coast. Remain at maximum height all the way to the target. You can climb up afterwards."

There was to be a spoof attack on Mannheim, to divert the enemy defences; this would go in earlier. There would be coffee and sandwiches in the crew-room at 3 p.m., transport at 3.35 p.m. They were to be at the aircraft by 4 p.m. First take-off at 5 p.m. Zero hour would be 7.35 p.m. Zero hour for the last wave would be between 14 and 17 minutes later.

We moved into the neighbouring room for the main briefing. Here the crews were sitting, each of them on their separate tables. Ours was in the middle of the room. Knights started telling them what had gone on in the pilots' briefing. When all the pilots had finished telling their crews the Group Captain stood upon the platform at the end of the room and read out one of the Prime Minister's messages of congratulation to Sir Arthur Harris. The Group Captain said he was sure they would all be glad to hear that Sir Arthur had sent a message expressing their appreciation of the Prime Minister's thoughtfulness. "And I'm sure you will join me in congratulating our late Wing Commander—Wing Commander Abercrombie—on his very well-deserved bar to the D.F.C. I wired him congratulations from us all."

He went on to say that Frankfurt had often been scheduled as a target but bad weather had often interfered. Tonight was perfect. "The Met. merchant won't dare to show his face if anything goes wrong."

"Now let's have fourteen first-class aiming-point photographs for the Wing Commander's first trip. Have a good trip—fourteen aiming-points, remember, and fourteen back."

We went to dress ourselves. I put on the whole rigmarole; flying suit, fleece-lined boots, sweater, parachute harness, and Mae West.

My conducting officer had come over from Group Headquarters especially to see me off. We were taken out to the aircraft in a crew-bus and he came in his little car.

"Feeling all right?" he said.

"I think so," I said.

"Well, you've got a first-class crew here—at least, I think they are," he said. "I'll just have a word with them. How many trips have you done?" he said to Knights.

"Twenty-three," said Knights.

"Ah, that's fine. Well, take very good care of him. Take very good care of him indeed. Weave in and out all the way there and back."

"Sure," said Knights.

"Well, I think I'll be pushing off now. I think I told you I'm going on leave tomorrow, I've a good bit to clear up. Well, have a good trip, Major. Hope you come through all right."

After he had driven off a corporal of the ground crew came up. "I've often thought I'd like to go on one of these trips just to see what it was like," he said. "But of course what I'd really like would be to be on air crew myself."

"Oh yes, of course I was all packed up and ready to go back in the 1938 crisis. I talked it out with Dad—I was working for him at the time. 'I'm going, Dad, I feel I must,' I said to him. 'If that's how you feel, son, I won't stand in your way,' he said. 'I wouldn't speak to you if you felt any other way.' But then, you see, I got married and that made things different. I had another talk with Dad in 1939, told him I was volunteering for air crew. 'You can't do that. Things are different now, you can't possibly leave Gladys,' he said. Then I saw he was right. I hadn't realized what a big difference it made being married. I was still keen to join up even if I couldn't go in air crew, but Dad said I'd better not do anything hasty. You see, I was reserved for quite a time. Then I couldn't keep from wanting to get into it, so I volunteered. Been in it more than two years now."

"Been posted about much?" I asked.

"No, I haven't much. Matter of fact, I live near here. Doesn't pay you to move about too much, you know. They don't get a chance to see what you can do. You do much better by staying in one place. That's how I got to be corporal. Still, I often wish I was on air crew," he said. "If it wasn't for Gladys it would be a very different story. But it's different when you're married."

"It is, too," I said.

"Well, I'd better be looking at my other aircraft. Hope you get back all right, sir. May see you later, then. I shall be here when you get back."

We stood around warming ourselves at the ground crew's fire which was burning outside their little shack. It was pretty cold. My excitement was constant but not urgent. But the sense of drama was satisfying. Things were very quiet. No sensation of being surrounded by an Air Armada waiting to take off. Just a small party in a corner of a big windy field. It was about twenty to five when Knights said, "Well, better be getting in." They started engines at 4.50 p.m. The pilot and the engineer started going through their checking and testing drill. I stood just behind them in the gangway which leads past the pilot's chair from the nose where the bomb-aimer was reclining to the navigator's position just behind me. The navigator was a rubicund country boy in appearance. He sat at a table which grew out from the wall of the aircraft and worked at his maps. I had a very good view out of the long right-hand window. I could see out of the left-hand side, but only a limited range of vision, owing to the high back of the pilot's seat and the black-out curtain which partitioned off the navigators' compartment. Outside I could see the ground crew shivering with their hands in their pockets.

"Is the door shut, Bill?" asked the pilot over the inter-com. On hear-

ing that it was he began to start the engines, one by one from right to left, until the four of them were roaring. Almost immediately the cabin began to get noticeably warmer. The feeling of dull tiredness into which my excitement had faded cleared and was replaced by the sense of high, nay lunatic, adventure. The aircraft edged out on to the taxi track. Other aircraft were lumbering in the same direction. Presently we wheeled into the runway past the little group of blue figures standing to watch the take-off and wave good-bye.

The sense of adventure was further enhanced by the gathering darkness into which the aircraft ahead was just disappearing, followed at about a thirty-second interval by our own. The pilot and the engineer were meanwhile carrying on their technical dialogue. "Undercarriage," said the pilot.

"Undercarriage up," said the engineer.

"O.K."

We flew over a river. "Let me know when I'm right over the 'drome," said the pilot.

"O.K.," said the navigator. "O.K., that'll do."

"O.K., navigator."

There was a band of olive green, orange and scarlet across the general greyiness of the sky: it was like marzipan. Turning round, I could look down the length of the aircraft; it looked much bigger in the air than on the ground. There was a slightly sinister red glow from each of the four engines.

The navigator asked the pilot to give him the air speed and height. "170, 11,200," intoned Knights. We started passing large formations of aircraft flying in the opposite direction and distinguishable by their navigation lights. Sometimes they flashed past seeming to be dangerously near. All this time we were climbing. At ten to six I noted that the stars were looking down.

"O.K. Turn right now," said the navigator, and we started wheeling round.

"What's the weather like?" asked the engineer.

"Pretty mucky," said Knights; "good job we're case-hardened, Ernie."

I noticed that Knights always looked behind before turning. In the Squadron-Leader's office there was a list of instructions for pilots headed "Experientia Docet" in which one of the rules was: "Always look behind before taking off. Also before doing a turn in the air. The machine you are flying isn't the only one in existence. Neither are you the only fool. Make a habit of this, but not the habit that makes you screw your head round without seeing anything."

There were other rules. "A good pilot when travelling by train or car should subconsciously be seeing the passing country in the light of forced landing-ground." "Always regard the other man as a fool. Then if he turns out to be one, you won't be surprised." "Do everything in the air smoothly—one might almost say with rhythm. Treat the machine as you would a lady." The one which I hoped Pilot Officer Knights had taken most to heart was "A steady, consistent pilot is of far more use than a brilliant, erratic one."

"Is that the coast?" the rear-gunner's voice suddenly asked over the

inter-com. I looked down and just made out the division between land and water.

"Yep, Norfolk," said Knights.

"Are we going in or coming out?" asked the rear-gunner.

"Going out over the North Sea."

"There's a convoy off Great Yarmouth," announced the navigator.

At 6.25 someone asked if we could have the heat lowered. I couldn't identify the inter-com. voice, but he said he was getting fairly sweating. The rear gunner excitedly announced the approach of an aircraft and then said, "O.K. Lancaster."

"Keep a good look round, Dad," said the pilot.

Distant flashes and searchlight cones began to be visible. The aircraft broke into an odd swaying motion. As we drew nearer the Continent the whole horizon was punctuated by signs of strife. These activities were forbiddingly widespread.

"Coast coming up," said Knights presently.

"You're heading straight for flak," said the bomb-aimer.

"That's right, run right into it," said the engineer sarcastically.

Knights was suddenly concerned that his windscreen was icing up. The engineer bent up forward and rubbed the rag round it.

"Two searchlights on the starboard bow," said the tail gunner.

"O.K.," said Knights.

The aircraft started weaving slightly. There was no need to tell me that there were two searchlights on the starboard bow. They were creeping with sinister purposefulness round the sky, every now and then executing a dart as if to demonstrate their reserve of mobility. They seemed to stroke the sky all around us, playing cat and mouse. It seemed unlastably good luck that they didn't find us. There would be no trouble about the morale of searchlight detachments if the men could be taken for a ride in a bomber and experience the attention and respect induced by the weapons they wield. I looked at my watch, which I could read quite plainly in the reflected light of the searchlights. It was 6.45 p.m. We seemed to be passing through a belt of searchlights, which, in the way of searchlights, switched on and off without apparent logic. There seemed to be no telling where they would spring up next. There was a lot of gunfire, but nothing came near us. Our relative position to most of the clusters of searchlights took a long time to change, which meant, I suppose, that they were much further away than I imagined. Quite suddenly, after flying in this atmosphere of action and enemy protest for some time, we were in the clear again. We were in fact clear of the coast, or in the fighters' parlour, according to how you felt. Incidentally, there isn't much you can feel.

"I think everybody's early, Bob. There's no searchlights at the back now," said the tail gunner after a little while. The tail gunner seemed to be easily the best-informed commentator on the social scene. He seemed to know the most and talked the most. Perhaps his isolation stimulated his appetite for sociability. Presently he said, "There's one going down in flames. Right behind us."

I looked back and couldn't see anything until the engineer pointed it out. I could distinguish a faint, shapeless glow of flames.

It served to emphasize that admission to these quarters was not free.

The gate was shut behind. The house was haunted. Europe was all around us and we were all alone. Looking down on the ground, you could see odd, inexplicable, unaggressive-looking lights from time to time. They had no apparent operational significance, and may even have been black-out infringements of the grosser kind. But they served to emphasize our sense of being cut off. I need hardly say, because it has been said so often already, that this gives one a tremendous sense of comradeship with the other members of the crew. Your companionship with each other knows no inhibitions of temperament or prejudice. Friendship is perfect and complete. The idea of carrying an irritation or a resentment against one of them into the air seems quite out of the question.

"Fighter flares in front," said Knights. "Keep a good lookout, Dad."

I began keeping a good lookout immediately. I saw a row of orange flares hanging pendant in the sky. They seemed to be quite a distance away but I distrusted them none the less. Having already underestimated the distance of some searchlights, there seemed no reason why I shouldn't be overestimating the distance of these flares. Back in the rear turret, Dad seemed to be having a whale of a time. He kept asking Knights to switch the aircraft in different directions so that he could get a better view of points where he thought he saw a fighter. (Incidentally, though he had nearly finished his operational tour and been on many severe raids, he had never yet been opened fire on by a fighter.)

The Ruhr, "Happy Valley", was now pointed out to me. I looked and saw nothing but distant cones of searchlights. "I think that's Cologne," said the engineer, pointing at nothing in particular. It wasn't really a very satisfactory view of the Ruhr. But I felt glad to have seen it. It felt very grand to be able to look out of the window and say to oneself, "Oh yes, of course, the Ruhr."

"That's Mannheim. Looks as if they're going in early," said Knights.

We could see it quite plainly ahead of us to the right, though it must have been about a hundred miles away. We could see the clusters of searchlights, the flares, the fires and the flashes. Mannheim is about fifty miles from Frankfurt, and it was about this time that we began to come in sight of our target. There were the same flashes and searchlights but much more clearly defined. It was quite unlike what I expected. Everything was so neatly beautiful.

"Hello, Bob, Junkers 88 coming up, starboard," said Dad in a suddenly urgent voice. Knights threw the aircraft over to allow the gunners to get a better view.

"No, O.K., sorry, it's a Lanc.," said Dad. I looked up and saw that it was indeed a Lanc. Coming towards us in what seemed like a sideways motion. One second a vague shape, it alarmingly materialized and defined its outline. There just seemed no possibility of avoiding collision. It was all over in a second, but it seemed quite a time. It passed just to the rear and slightly high. I looked up and saw its underbelly skim over us. "Jesus, did you see that?" said Knights.

"I thought we'd had it that time," said the engineer. The aircraft was still rocking from the impact with the other aircraft's slipstream. We were now coming up to Frankfurt proper. We could see what looked like hundreds of thousands of electric light bulbs carpeting the ground.

It took me some little time to realize that these were incendiaries. They looked so regular and artificial, so naively pretty, that one couldn't associate them with any work of destruction. There was a large, long area of them shaped like the lobes of a gigantic liver. The sky was suddenly filled with the regular grey puffs of a flak barrage. These barrages seemed to me extraordinarily consistent in their strength. They don't just throw up a few hundred rounds and stop. They continue with what seems unlimited regularity. With the flares dropped by the pathfinders, the flares dropped by the enemy fighters, the waving searchlights, the bead-like pattern of incendiary fires on the ground, and the flashes of gunfire, there was a sense of supreme experience and excitement. Knights was working to keep us out of the clutches of some peculiarly inquisitive searchlights, and away to the right another aircraft had failed to keep out of the way. We could see it wriggling in the cone of searchlights, which were doing their best to hold it there while the guns concentrated on it. The cruel thing is that one's only sensation is one of relief that the searchlights are temporarily diverted elsewhere. One feels no urge to go to the assistance of the unfortunate aircraft that is cornered. Of course, obviously it would be senseless to do so, but it seems extraordinary that one doesn't feel any urge to do so. I noticed the same indifference to the troubles of others when flying with the Americans. There is complete unity within the individual aircraft, but for some reason that is where it ends. Nor is it simply the expression of my own individual idiosyncrasy. It was obviously a general state of mind. All this time the pilot and the navigator were keeping up a running dialogue on how the time was going for the approach to the target. Apparently we were a minute or two early, so we had to lose that amount of time. It was pretty impressive, if the word isn't too banal, to hear the young men talking about losing a minute or two while passing through this firework display. I hadn't much idea of what was going on. I didn't know whether we were running up to the target or still cruising around, and I didn't want to disturb the crew in any way. It hardly seemed in my best interest to do so. I was anxious that they should give of their best, and concentrate closely on the work in hand. But presently I realized that we were running up.

"Get weaving, Skipper, the night's too long," said someone.

"I can't see that river," said Knights.

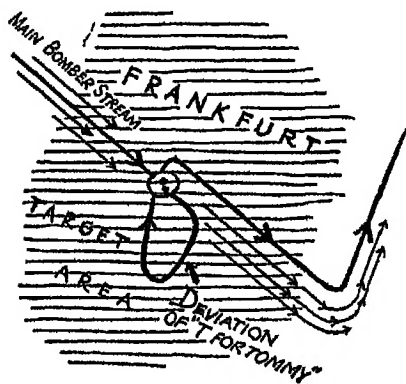
"Bomb-doors open," said whoever's business it was to open them.

"How're we doing?" said someone.

"Fine," said someone else.

Apparently the first time over the target conditions weren't satisfactory. They couldn't see pathfinding flares which they were supposed to bomb, so we flew across the town, then circled round and approached the target area from another direction. Coming back on to the target it was like bright daylight. It is very difficult to describe. Nothing that I have ever read on the subject of bombing gave me anything like the impression which I actually had on the spot. I expected something of the atmosphere of a fire-blitz on the ground. I hadn't allowed for the sense of detachment produced by being so high. You knew that down there was a town of half a million people undergoing the most horrible ordeal. By staring round the engineer's shoulder I could see the bomb-aimer preparing

to press the button which would release another 4,000 lbs. contribution to this ordeal. But it seemed quite unreal. The incendiaries were dropped first and then the 4,000-lb. cookie. Just beforehand there was an appreciable tenseness of the crew. The pilot, of course, had to keep the aircraft flying as level as possible for the bombing run. He turned and half rose from his seat as if he were willing the aircraft to a supreme effort. I tried to write down the dialogue between pilot and bomb-aimer, but it was too fast for my hobbling shorthand. I wrote it down, but now I can't transcribe it. I did not feel any appreciable lightness of the aircraft when 'bombs away' was announced. All I knew was that the dialogue of 'Steady', 'Hold her steady', 'O.K., Bob', 'O.K., Bomb-aimer' and the sing-song intonation of numbers just before the dropping, subsided. Knights asked the bomb-aimer if he thought they had obtained a satisfactory picture; the bomb-aimer thought he had. They were all professionally satisfied with the delivery of the bomb. There was a sense of achievement. The engineer pointed out the burning streets of Frankfurt.



I could just make them out from an orange streak in the carpet of fairy-like lights produced by the incendiaries. I tried to think of the spectacle in terms of what was going on below, but it was just impossible to worry about. Mostly, I suppose, because we had plenty to worry about above.

The amount of fun and fury and fighter-flares was extraordinary. The sky was simply full of trouble. Yet oddly enough it was difficult to think of us in this particular aircraft as actively threatened by sudden death. I

don't mean that, speaking for myself, I wasn't afraid. Certainly I was in a state of great alarm. But I didn't really expect that we in this aircraft would buy it.

There seemed to be plenty to buy. The tail gunner reported that he counted forty-nine fighter-flares. Just afterwards he reported a fight going on behind us to starboard. I looked back and saw the flares and stabs of flame. This and the one we saw just after crossing the coast were the only two aircraft we saw going down, though we later learned that forty-two aircraft had been lost that night.

"Is there a small defended area on the starboard?" Knights asked the navigator. Two or three of the crew got into an argument as to whether it was Aachen or Brussels. "That's Antwerp a bit further up," said one of them. It was ridiculous to hear the young men talk of the cities of Western Europe in terms of where they were last Friday—no, I'm a liar, that was Tuesday—knowing their way so inattentively round the Continent in these bizarre circumstances. They knew them not by their cultural monuments, their political significance or their hotels, but simply by their flak and searchlights barrages. They all looked alike to me, but I was told that after only two or three trips you

remember the way awfully well. There was quite a lot of flak going up over Brussels. We crossed the coast in the neighbourhood of Rotterdam, and just before doing so were nearly caught by searchlights. "Hello, they're having a go," said Knights, as the light seemed to lift the fuselage. The aircraft started weaving as, amid incongruously facetious encouragement by the crew, Knights went about the routine of evasion. When you consider how large the coast of Europe is it seems extraordinary how difficult it is to cross it without coming up against resistance of one kind or another. "Keep a good lookout, Dad. See we're not being followed," said Knights. "O.K.," said Dad. It seemed a long way back over the North Sea. I was getting very tired of standing. The engineer let me sit on his seat for a spell, but then he had to have it back to go on with his business. Coffee was now served from thermos flasks. I opened the paper bag of rations with which we had been issued. There was an orange, a packet of chocolate, some boiled sweets, and two packets of chewing-gum. I ate the chocolate, but with difficulty, as it was frozen hard. I then ate the orange, which was also frozen. In fact the emotional experience of eating that orange was quite lost. It was painfully cold in the mouth. We were now down to 10,000 or 11,000 feet and had taken off our oxygen masks. It wasn't long, but it seemed long, before we were skirting the English Coast. There were searchlights here too, but what a difference in their attitude! These were kindly lights pointing the way to security, not fingers of fate contriving our doom. It was now something past 10 p.m., and we were due to land at 11 p.m. That last hour seemed interminable. I found it odd that I felt no particular sense of achievement, as I had anticipated. All I felt was awfully tired.

The landing-grounds were illuminated by circles of tiny lights. And over each aerodrome there was a guiding cone of searchlights. The odd thing was that, at this height, they seemed so very close together. It was as if all the landing-grounds were in adjoining fields, instead of being many miles apart. I got to the point where I didn't think we were ever going to land, but eventually we did.

We were driven back to be interrogated, and then home to the mess for bacon and egg.

I got to bed sometime after 2 a.m.

This crew had been on operations for some time, and expected to finish their term in a month or so. The operations weren't at all monotonous, said Knights, but they were all of a kind. After the first few trips you learned your way round. Some crews regarded the business as getting progressively easier with each raid, but this crew made a point of regarding each raid as the first. They thought that was the surest way of getting through.

FOOTNOTE.—The American Fortress crews with which I flew on daylight operations said that they would be scared stiff to fly at night in the R.A.F. fashion, while the R.A.F. crew said that they would be scared stiff to operate by day.

There seems to be a moral lurking somewhere here.

